



Invisible Evidence

Kelly Wallace

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

Blurb

Julie Simmons is an intriguing woman with a special gift and a traumatic past. The willowy psychic, once well known for working with the police department to solve high-profile homicide cases, may want to distance herself from law enforcement, but she's long harbored a secret desire to get close to ex-cop Vincent Marcelli.

Vincent Marcelli, a private investigator who lives by his own rules, works his own hours, and takes orders from no one, has accepted his first kidnapping case. It was supposed to be an open and shut assignment, but every clue seems to lead to a dead end—until he asks Julie to help him, that is. The moment Vince and Julie meet, sparks begin to fly. As they work side-by-side, in a race against time, the tension mounts and the heat rises. Julie soon finds herself living out her fantasy in the arms and bed of one gorgeous Vince Marcelli. With so much at stake, and danger lurking, will she be able to help the hardened detective solve the case and win his heart?

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my 5 daughters who think my erotic romances are truly gross, but are supportive and happy for me nonetheless.

I'd also like to thank my geeky scientist for putting up with loooong hours of, "Honey, let's see what it's like when we do this or that." This way I can have firsthand information on how things actually DO look, feel, sound and smell when it comes to bedroom antics.

And thank you to everyone at Liquid Silver for loving my work as much as I do and allowing me to share it with readers everywhere.

Prologue

She let out a shaky breath, knuckles white as she clutched the steering wheel of the rented Toyota. Only one thought occupied her frantic mind—they had to get away. Fast.

Her pale gray eyes darted to the rearview mirror, the side mirror, taking in every bit of the noonday desert scenery behind them. Good, they weren't being followed. Yet.

With an unsteady hand, she pushed back a few strands of blond hair that stuck to the sweat on her forehead then wiped her hand on the thigh of her khaki shorts. Damn, was it hot! She fumbled with the controls on the dashboard, trying to resuscitate the dead air conditioner. It worked for about the first two hours of driving but had died after that. A few bangs with the side of her fist forced it to emit a couple of weak wheezes of cool air, but it continued to puff and pant only a heated breeze after that. Twisting the knob into the 'off' position, she gave up on the hope of some chilled air, tensely leaning back in the seat.

She glanced around her small environment. Everything she owned and everything she was existed inside this car. Her entire life was in the seat beside her. Right now her world felt like a vacuum. Deep space. She gave a short laugh, wanting nothing more than to be in a ship headed toward some unknown galaxy, an obscure planet where they'd never be found. But she was here on earth and had to be careful. Had to plan each step just-so to avoid losing it all.

The small boy next to her whimpered for his mother. She reached over, caressing his tear-wet cheek, a maternal smile on her lips. "Don't cry, Tommy. I'll take real good care of you."

She grabbed the forty-ounce soda she'd gotten at the convenience store and swirled it around to mix the ice in.

A cautious sip told her that the Coke had long ago gone flat and turned to weak sugar water. Still, it was better than nothing. She drained half of what remained in the blue and white waxy cup, then set it back in the holder.

Hoping for some relief from the stifling heat, she pressed a button and the window at her side slid out of view. Pulling her head back, she grimaced when only a furnace-like blast slammed into her. She longed for the comforts of the home she'd left behind; her mind swimming imaginary laps in the huge kidney-shaped pool. With her next breath, another scene slid in front of it. Sitting in the Jacuzzi sharing stolen moments of heated passion with him...

She gritted her teeth and pushed on the steering wheel, straightening her arms, pressing herself back into the seat, mentally distancing herself from the memory.

Lies. All lies. She had to let them go, no matter how hard it was. Besides, she glanced over at her small companion and smiled to herself. She had a new life now.

"I want my mommy and daddy," the boy whined, wiping his runny nose with the back of his hand.

"I'm sorry, sweetie." She licked her thumb and wiped off the smudge of chocolate from his cheek. He wore more of the Eskimo pie than ate it, she wryly mused.

"Everything's going to be okay."

Her mien slipped down several notches as he shrank away from her touch and she

saw the fear and confusion in his eyes. She turned away from him, focusing back on the long strip of lonely highway. Inhaling a deep breath, she fought against the rage building in her again as she remembered all of the injustices that had been done to her, so many cruelties, and all without an ounce of guilt.

She exhaled slowly, keeping her voice low and steady. "You're mine now."

Her anxious eyes swept over the four-year-old's mop of blond curly hair and large, gray eyes. Yes, he could pass for her child. Nobody would know. And in time Tommy would no longer remember his parents. He was young. He would forget. She would make sure of it.

"But I belong to Mommy and Daddy, not you. I want to go home!" He drew his knees up to his chest, one thumb going in his mouth, and whispered, "I want to go home." A tear slid down his cheek, ran along his knuckles and dripped onto his knee.

"No, Tommy," she ground out, feeling her blood race through her hotter and more wrathful than ever. "You're not going back there." She shot him a pleading look. Why couldn't he understand? Why didn't he see that she loved him so much? "They don't love you like I do. You have to trust me. I won't let them take you away from me!" Her last words were loud, filling the tiny car with a cloud of rage. The boy jumped at the harsh sound, buried his face in his knees and cried louder.

"Baby," she ran her hand over his silky hair, "there's no reason to cry. Things are going to be good. You'll see."

The woman's heart flipped as she spotted the highway sign marking the border into the next state. She released the tight grip she'd had on the steering wheel and sighed, her shoulders drooping forward. They were safe now. Nobody would find them, she thought with a surge of joy. She had planned it all so her tracks would be covered. Just a few stops along the way to throw off the scent and after that they'd go down to Mexico.

Victory danced over her lips. Tommy was hers. Now they would ache as deeply as she did. They were finally paying for their mistakes, for what they did to her.

Nobody tore her heart out, stole a part of her life from her, and got away with it.

She smiled malevolently at the scenes running through her mind. She could see them waking up each and every morning without their son. Christmas presents would go unwrapped, birthdays uncelebrated, but certainly not forgotten. They would be in a living hell, and she was glad. As far as she was concerned, Tommy was hers. They owed her. She only took what was rightfully hers.

Grabbing a dry tissue from the box at her side, she dabbed at the sweat running down her neck. It was early summer. The temperature outside the Celica had to be in the high-nineties. She took in the cactus, yucca, dirt and rocks all around, testimony of the bone-dry environment in this area. Waves of heat shimmered off the road.

Damn, she was hot, inside and out, though she knew most of it was just nerves. She would feel a whole lot better once they were settled. Once they found a place more permanent than the temporary one she had rented a few days ago.

It would be their momentary hiding place, just until she worked out the next stage of her plan. It couldn't be that hard. Thousands of children were kidnapped every year without ever being found. She fully intended on this being such a case.

This was no quick decision for her. She had been planning it all for the past few months, been saving her money even longer. There was enough to start over again. Begin a new life. In another country. With her new son.

Her expression turned soft on the boy beside her. "Don't cry, baby." She tickled his side, wanting to make him giggle, but he only jumped, pressing himself into a tight ball. She sighed. "We'll be okay. I promise to take good care of you. I love you. I would never do anything to hurt you."

But just let them try to take you away from me. She stared blankly at the carpet of asphalt ahead. She reached down with her left hand, feeling along the side of her seat until her fingers encountered the heated metal. Gripping it for a moment, she felt a sense of power as she imagined pulling the trigger. She wouldn't think twice about spilling blood to keep Tommy.

Whether the blood of the authorities, his parents, or even herself and Tommy's both, nobody was going to take him away from her. Ever.

Chapter One

Vince absently studied the nameplate he held in his hands, tracing the letters with his index finger over and over, as if answers to his current dilemma could be found within the engraved wood and gold leaf. VINCENT MARCELLI—PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR. It had been a parting gift from his friend and ex-commanding officer, Sergeant Bill Anderson.

Placing the nameplate back at the front of his cluttered desk, Vince jabbed a frustrated hand through his hair, grumbling a few choice cuss words. He had never failed to solve a case—until now.

His projects usually consisted of insurance fraud, husbands or wives looking for concrete proof of infidelity in order to reap all of the benefits after the divorce, and companies trying to bust the less-than-honest employee. He had always caught them, too. But this time he was at a dead-end. His first kidnapping case and he couldn't solve the damned thing.

He went over his notes for the hundredth time, checking off each item again as he pored over the words, always hoping he'd missed something or that it would finally all click into place, making it clear to him.

Vince wasn't one to give up, but no matter how badly it went against every cell in his six-foot-four Italian body, he needed help—bad. He also needed a cigarette—desperately.

Tossing the tablet and pen aside, he searched the top drawer of his desk, impatiently shoving pencils, papers and other whatnots aside, seeking the cellophane wrapped box. Nothing.

Slamming the drawer shut, he laid his aching head on the only clean spot his desk possessed and swore blackly as he remembered that he had quit smoking nearly three months ago.

At the time it had seemed like a great idea as his fortieth birthday loomed ever closer, but now he cursed the day he threw the last pack away. Grabbing a stick of spearmint gum from beneath a coffee-stained folder, he grudgingly tore the wrapper off, shoved the gum into his mouth and chewed. Hard. It did help. A little.

Wadding the silver paper into a tight ball and flicking it across the room, he inhaled a deep breath to clear his mind and admitted that he didn't regret giving up smoking one bit, since deep breathing and walking more than a block used to nearly give him a coronary.

To pass some time, he began clearing his desk, retiring folders containing long-ago closed cases to his battered file cabinet, trying to get his mind off cigarettes and mentally preparing himself for the arrival of Julie Simmons ... psychic.

Just thinking the word left a bad taste in his mouth. He didn't believe in any of that ESP crap, but he was desperate and going just a little bit insane. Insanity could be the only reason he was resorting to Madam Zelda and her crystal ball.

Vince grimaced at the vivid images his mind conjured up. She was probably an old hag with a hairy wart on her chin and a voice that sounded like an eighteen-wheeler jamming on its brakes. Of course, all were suppositions since he'd never actually seen or spoken to the woman. His call to her the previous evening had connected with some

goofy prerecorded thing on her phone. So he'd left his message, chided himself for calling in the first place, and wondered if she'd even show up.

He knew Ms. Simmons had helped on numerous cases with the LAPD over the years. Her reputation for obtaining information with her psychic gift was highly praised around the precincts she assisted. A crock is what he'd called it, yet here he was; ready to beg her on bended knee for help in cracking one of his cases.

Maybe if it hadn't involved a child, he wouldn't be so stressed-out about the whole thing, but just thinking about a little kid separated from his parents, most likely terrified ... well, it nearly ripped him apart.

So he would swallow his pride, listen to what Ms. Simmons had in way of information—if there was any—thank her, pay her, and try not to let the door hit her in the ass on the way out.

Aiming for the overly filled wastebasket at his side and squarely missing it, Vince spit out the wad of now bland rubber. Lord, was he tense. Obviously, he would have to find another outlet for his stress and tension. Quick.

Hearing the doorbell ring, Vince let out a sigh, pushing his bulk away from the desk, the wheels of the small office chair groaning in protest. In just a few strides he crossed the short distance from his office to the front door in the living room.

Grasping the doorknob with a large and not too steady hand, he mustered up all the strength he knew he would need while listening to the crackpot who was probably standing on the other side.

"Let's get this charade over with," he muttered under his breath, jerking the door open ... and there she stood.

Vince sucked in a sharp breath, feeling as if he'd been shot. The tension in his back and shoulders took a nosedive straight into his dick, making his jeans uncomfortably snug.

"So, we finally meet, Marcelli." The woman smiled warmly, holding out a slender hand in greeting.

This was the psychotic crackpot? The old hag he had expected to encounter?

He gave her a brief once-over. She wore a gauzy-type dress in the wildest print he had ever seen. Was any color of the rainbow left out? It came down to her shins, bringing attention to white ankle socks and turquoise canvas sneakers gracing her feet. The bell sleeves of her filmy blouse fluttered with the June breeze the L.A. basin had been blessed with today. Vince smiled ever so slightly, in spite of himself. She looked more like a fairy or sprite than a Gypsy.

Rendered mute, Vince warily accepted her hand, engulfing it with his own. He gave the appendage a quick up and down motion as he collected his senses.

Thankfully, with his next labored breath, his shock subsided. He took his hand back and stuffed it in the rear pocket of his jeans, all the while trying to not let the warm and apparently genuine smile on her face melt his cold, hard criticism of her kind. Just because she was small and innocent looking didn't mean he automatically trusted her. He'd been fooled by the best.

A faded yellow VW with a mangled back bumper caught his eye as it pulled up to the curb in front of his house. Vince studied the driver for a second. An old lady and young kid sat in the car talking. *That has to be the psychic.* There was no way that this woman, he glanced at the package in front of him, could be the psychic. He never had

luck like that.

The kid got out of the car and waved to the elderly woman, then trotted off two houses down. Evidently she was just dropping him off. So ... his luck was about to change? Somehow he had a sinking feeling it wasn't such a good thing.

"I've waited a long time for this," Julie Simmons conceded after he'd stood there in silence for an uncomfortable minute. Vince couldn't help but notice that her voice sounded more like smooth, twenty-year-old scotch than screeching brakes.

"To shake my hand?" he asked dryly. His left hand took up residence in the other back pocket.

She shrugged and smiled brightly, tucking her envelope purse under her arm. "That, among other things."

Vince frowned down at her. Way down. What the hell was that supposed to mean? He didn't have the foggiest, and didn't care at the moment. He needed information about the case at hand, not to stand around all day attempting to figure out this woman's cryptic messages—even if his insides did find her rather appealing.

His gaze lingered on her face a moment. She certainly was pretty, in a pixie sort of way. No, maybe cute was a more exact word. She had dark coffee-colored eyes and shoulder length hair that matched in tone. As she moved, the shiny mane swished around her face. He knew he was staring as his mind started to wander along a path it hadn't been down in a very long time. Instantly, he put a stop to the asinine thoughts.

"Umm ... did you want me to do the reading out here on the porch?" She glanced around, looking uncomfortable at his obvious scrutiny.

Vince cleared his throat, bringing himself back to the here and now. "Come in, Miss Simmons." He used his most business-like tone. Freeing his hands, he motioned for her to follow. She would be out of here in less than twenty minutes, thirty at the most, no need to rouse his dormant hormones.

As they entered his small, cluttered office, he saw her eyeing the items perched near the edge of his desk. "Ready for business, I see."

"Yep, ready for business," he said brusquely, giving no further explanation.

"This yours?" She stopped, lifted one foot from the gray carpeting and pulled off a wad of gum.

Vince flushed from the neck all the way to his scalp. "Yeah." He grabbed the gum from her and threw it in the wastebasket. "Sorry about that." Frowning, he cleared his throat and said, "I gather you received the details I left on your voicemail regarding the information I was seeking, and my pay rate."

Miss Simmons nodded and looked like she was trying very hard not to smile. "You don't think I can help you one bit, do you?"

"Just skeptical. Comes with the territory." Vince shrugged. Propping himself against one side of the heavy desk, sneaker-clad feet crossed at the ankles, he gestured for her to take the brown vinyl chair in front of it. When she took the offered spot, he tipped his head, pointing at the first item, indicating that she should pick it up and begin her reading. No chitchat, no questions, no forms to fill out. He didn't go for any of that formal crap. He simply wanted to get down to business.

"Well, let's get started." Tucking her purse beside her she reached out, taking the worn wallet. "It's yours."

He raised an eyebrow, arms folded over his chest. "How do you know?"

"It's still warm." She grinned up at him. He grunted.

"What's inside?" He knew he sounded critical, but she didn't seem to let it bother her.

Miss Simmons leaned back and closed her eyes, running her fingers over the exterior of his wallet. Vince didn't have to wait long.

"Let's see," she began. "A credit card that's maxed out ... twelve dollars ... various receipts and notes to yourself ... a faded picture of your mom and dad, and..." she smiled, "a foil packet you carry around 'just in case'."

Opening her eyes, she looked up at him and winked. "May I suggest you replace it, detective? Latex doesn't last forever, you know."

Vince snorted, ignoring that last statement. "Let's see if you're right." He took the wallet from her. Flipping it open, he pulled out a Visa, tossing it onto the desk.

"Guess I should make a payment." His dark gaze was on her as he extracted a ten-dollar bill and two singles. "Started out with a twenty, but I had lunch earlier." The bills joined the card.

"Burgers and fries over at the Golden Arches," Miss Simmons threw in, never taking her eyes off him.

Vince gave a tight nod. "Crap I should throw away." Out came a small handful of carelessly folded papers. "Mom and Pop." He set down the aged black and white photo of the couple on their wedding day. "Last and least." He withdrew the wrapped condom. "Over a year old and never needed."

Gathering all but the notes and receipts, he placed them back in his wallet, sliding it into a rear pocket of his antique jeans. "Are you always so on-target?" He fully faced her now, palms flat on the desk to support his weight. He was impressed, but was sure to hide it well.

"No. Not always." Julie lifted her palms and shrugged, a smile playing over her lips. "Unless the vibrations impress me."

He tilted his head to the side, pointing at his chest with an index finger. "My vibes impress you?"

Julie nodded. "Especially that last one." She wagged her eyebrows. "I'm glad to know you aren't promiscuous, detective."

For a second he thought about tossing her out on her pretty little ass. Instead, he cracked a rueful smile. "Promiscuous, hell, I give new meaning to second-time virgin!" They laughed together, Vince feeling strangely at ease in her company. He took it as a bad sign. Although his hormones went all goofy the second he'd laid eyes on her, he reminded himself yet again that this was strictly business.

"Same here," she admitted.

Vince folded his arms over his chest once again, sat on the edge of the desk, and rolled his eyes. "Oh sure, like you don't have guys lined up around the block."

"Thanks for the compliment, but with my talent I know all about a guy in less than half a minute." He watched as a small shiver passed through her. "Pretty scary, some of them."

"So you've never been married?" He found himself genuinely curious.

"No. My job takes a lot out of me." She leaned forward as if confessing a secret, looked up at him and whispered, "Besides, men don't like the fact that I can read their minds."

"You can?" Vince stood up straight and his heart came to a screeching halt, believing

her for a second. He then realized she was joking. Had to be, because if she could read minds, his face would have been slapped the moment he opened the door and got an eyeful of her.

"Of course not." She gave a dismissing wave of her hand before leaning back in the chair once more. "I just pick up vibrations from personal objects which are played back in my mind like a movie or sometimes snapshots. Some are fuzzy and vague, some strong and clear. Still, it keeps the creeps away." She changed the subject. "So, how about you?"

"No. I'm afraid I can't read minds." Vince suppressed a grin, leaning against the desk once again. It was his turn to knock her on her ass after that little comment she'd made a moment ago, hinting at his nonexistent sex life.

"Oh, I'm sure of the fact," she said concretely, her eyes serious. "My face hasn't been slapped yet."

Vince was rendered mute for the second time in only fifteen minutes. He felt his blood pressure shoot up and his face was hot. He was blushing! What the hell was his problem? He was acting like some sixteen-year-old kid being hit on by his biology teacher. He took it as another bad sign.

"Were you ever married?" Miss Simmons broke the silence around them.

"Were? How about are?" Vince was grateful for the change of subject. He decided with his next heartbeat that he didn't like Julie Simmons. Not one single bit. She was doing weird shit to his insides, not to mention his brain. Better to get this over and done with and get her out of here.

She shook her head, her silky hair sliding softly over her shoulders as she did so. Vince fought off the desire to touch that hair. "No ring," she stated. "No picture of the little woman. And look at this place." She held an upturned palm to the room, her head doing a couple of one-eighties right and left before looking at him again. "No offense."

"I get the point." Vince let out a quick breath through his nose. "You're very perceptive."

"Comes with the territory." She sat there quietly for way too long and Vince knew she wanted an answer to her previous question.

"Not that it has anything to do with the case, but since you're curious ... I'm divorced." He levered his body from the desk, walking behind the sprite in his client chair, uncomfortable about exposing any part of his past. So why the hell was he doing it? "Have been for ten years." He was at her side, continuing on until he sat behind the desk; a physical barrier. She was getting too personal, too soon.

Vince quickly switched lanes. "Let's get back to work." He had a case to solve, and sure as hell didn't want to continue dwelling on his mistakes of the past.

Without another word he watched her pick up the crisp, white handkerchief and closed her eyes for a moment. "Nothing." She looked straight at him.

He stuck the eraser end of a pencil in his mouth. It was a poor substitute for a cigarette, but he found himself tense again. He frowned hard before looking at the woman across from him. Tossing the pencil on the desk, he watched as it landed amongst a pile of Post-its he had intended to throw away. "Good, it's new."

"Ah, still testing me?" She leaned forward and placed the scrap of material back on the desk.

"Yep." He grew serious. "I can't afford to take chances. This case is too important." A kind which I'll never take on again, he assured himself.

"I understand." Her voice was soft. "So, did I pass?"

He shrugged. "For now."

"Such confidence, detective." She grimaced and closed her eyes.

"Comes with the territory." Vince watched as she massaged her temples. "You okay?"

"I will be." She squinted. "Readings give me a bugger of a headache."

"I can see that." He frowned, concerned that the small reading had wiped her out, wondering if it was a compassionate thought or a selfish one.

Julie shrugged. "I'm a bit out of practice. I quit working cases a few years ago because they're so draining, especially the traumatic ones." She swallowed hard. "These days I spend my time teaching a parapsychology class at the local junior college. The pay is steady, I still get to use my gift to a certain extent, and it's far less exhausting."

He leaned back, watching her through hooded eyes. "I guess that's good, although helping to solve murders and other crimes seems more fulfilling than teaching a bunch of teens and bored housewives how to tap into their psychic powers." He wiggled two fingers in the air with those last words.

She looked pissed for a second, but let out a sigh and said, "Now what?" She looked expectantly at him.

"Well," he began, rooted behind the desk. "Let me give you the brief particulars of the case."

She held up a hand to stop his words. "No details, okay? I don't want anything you might say to influence my readings. Just tell me what the case involves."

"Okay." He shrugged. "Robert and June Scott came to me two weeks ago saying that their son had been kidnapped. Prime suspect is the nanny. The police worked their asses off for half a month, but have exhausted all leads. So have I."

He stood and walked over to where she sat, sticking his hands in the back pockets of his jeans since he didn't know what to do with them. "First time I've failed to solve a case," he grumbled.

"Well, now you've got me." She reached out, patting his thigh.

"Awfully sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"Pretty much." She lifted a shoulder then let it drop. "I'm sure we'll solve this case."

"We?"

"Yeah. We." She pointed at him then herself. "As in, you and me."

He shook his head. "Nuh-uh."

"What do you mean by that?" She sat up straight, her eyes stabbing his, waiting for an answer.

Vince started pacing the small room in frustration. One hand slid free of its denim prison and raked through his hair. After crossing the room and back several times, he came to stop next to her, looking down at her with narrowed eyes. "Look, I'm used to doing things my way, on my own, with no one's help." He felt defeated as he said, "You don't know what pride I had to swallow in asking you here."

"Maybe I do," she whispered in return.

Vince blinked away the image of those soft, compassionate eyes on him. "Look, all I want is for you to give me a reading on some of the boy's items, give me the information and I'll take it from there. Don't shake your head at me like that!" He pointed a finger at her before throwing his arms up in frustration. "Traipsing all over who-the-hell-knows-

where is no place for a woman—"

"Listen," she interrupted and started poking him in the stomach with a stiff finger. "We're in this thing to-ge-ther." She punctuated every syllable with an extra firm poke. "From beginning to end. You need me, now you've got me, but on my terms."

"Things could get hairy. I won't put you in any danger—"

"Vince," she interrupted again, their eyes a silent duel of wills. "If there's one thing you should know about me, it's that I don't take no for an answer. Ever."

He let out an irritated sigh. "Damn, you're stubborn!" He continued looking down at her in frustration. "You won't give an inch, will you? Won't listen to the voice of reason." He turned his back to her and scrubbed his hands over his face.

She exhaled, sounding exasperated.

He swung back around, eyes hard. "You're jumping into this thing as if it's some TV adventure where the good guy always wins. Where everything is sunshine and rainbows in the end." Putting his hands on either arm of the chair she occupied, he bent over so his face was only a breath away from hers. "With my experience I know that's about a million miles away from the truth."

Miss Simmons bit on her bottom lip, eyes narrowed. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm not a child." She crossed her arms under her breasts and raised her chin.

Vince took a step backward, needing some breathing room. He wanted to be angry at her for trying to force her way into one of his cases and into his life. For rousing in less than an hour what he had laid to rest so long ago—his past and his libido. But he gave up the fight on the spot, realizing she was just as bull-headed as he was. Just as dedicated to her work.

"Okay." He gave in quite easily, surprising the hell out of himself. He just hoped in this particular case the good guys did win ... for her sake. "But we play by my rules." He jabbed his chest with a thumb. "Got it?"

"Sure." Her tone was matter-of-fact, her shrug nonchalant, but Vince had a really weird feeling he'd live to regret this.

For his own peace of mind he changed the subject. "How about dinner? I can toss something on the stove for us to eat and go to the Scott's afterward." He glanced at his watch. "They should be home in a couple hours. We'll go over there so you can read some of the boy's things and see if you can find anything."

Taking a deep breath, she lifted her face to him once more and smiled. "That sounds great, but no burgers. I've got to keep my channels open. Can't afford to gum them up with junk food if I'm to be of any use to you."

Her smile was contagious and Vince was left breathless once again. It was a damned good thing he had given up booze and cigarettes, because the way this woman kept depriving his lungs of oxygen, he'd have been dead on the carpet by now.

And he wondered ... could fourteen-month-old latex survive just a bit longer?

Just as quickly, he stomped on that thought and shot it dead in its tracks. They were working on a case, not answering a personals ad. He didn't need his work affected by thoughts of how, when, and why to make any moves on her. Besides, he wasn't even sure he liked the woman. His feelings kept fluctuating, often hovering in areas he thought better left alone and unexplored.

Chapter Two

"So ... how about dinner?" Julie reminded.

"Dinner?" He looked down at her with puzzlement in his eyes, blinked a couple of times. "Oh! Sure."

"Readings always make me ravenous."

As she started to stand, Vince offered a helping hand. "Ravenous? That wasn't much of a reading, was it?"

She gave a half-smile. "No."

"I can't imagine how hungry you'd be after a real reading." Her hand still rested in his.

"Trust me. I could devour a T-rex." Julie laughed, but her head felt fuzzy and achy from the reading she had just done, combined with the stress of trying to make a good impression. After three years destiny had finally been handed to her. She vowed to make the most of it.

Vince looked nonplussed, freeing her hand. "A T-rex?"

"Or two." Grabbing her purse, she opened it, fishing around for the small, green plastic bottle that held permanent residence inside. "I bought stock in Excedrin."

"Are you going to be able to do the reading tonight?" He looked her over as if he was having second thoughts. "I know that sounds selfish, but this is business."

Julie gave a small shake of her head. "It's okay. I'll be fine. Don't look so skeptical. You'll get your information." She held her fingers up in a Girl Scout promise.

All business, she repeated his words. Is that how it would remain between the two of them, she grimly mused.

"Yeah ... okay." He nodded and she wondered what was there behind his hesitant words. He left the room and came back with some water.

"Does it tear you up that bad?" He handed her the heavy green glass that looked straight out of the seventies.

"Nah." She took a few gulps of water to wash down the pills, waving him off. "It's much better now. I just get a little dizzy, like my head's filled with helium, and I often get headaches." She set the glass on his desk and took a cleansing breath. "While you prepare this culinary delight, do you mind if I use the bathroom?"

He tilted his head back and to the side, looking at her through half-closed eyes and said, "Sure, it's over here." He turned and Julie followed in his footsteps.

"Through there." He pointed to a room off to the right, just inside his bedroom.

Julie bit on her bottom lip as she caught sight of his bed. "Thanks."

"No problem. I'll be in the kitchen."

She nodded and walked through the bedroom then into the small bathroom tiled in beige and white, closing the door behind her. She blew a long breath between her lips. Turning on the faucet, she splashed some cold water on her face. She smiled weakly at her reflection.

Being in the presence of the very man she'd had her eye on for so long was quickly jumbling her mind. Since she needed to perform an accurate reading to help find the kidnapped boy, she'd have to keep a clear head. Mentally, she surrounded herself with a

golden orb of positive energy that would help keep anything negative or distracting at bay.

Feeling better, she patted her face dry with a towel, flipped off the light that had been on when she'd entered and walked out. She smiled warmly, taking in the room around her. This was Vince's bedroom. Just like his office, it was sparsely occupied with ancient furnishings. Still, it all seemed to fit Vince Marcelli's character. No show. No act. No glitz or glamour. He was a man who personified simplicity, the comfort of permanence.

A desk and computer sat across the room. Evidently he squeezed work into his life every chance he got.

Her eyes immediately slid to the left. *His bed*. The burgundy spread was shoved to the foot of it. His sheets and pillowcases were plain white, like the towels in the bathroom.

A twinge of curiosity shot through her. She gravitated toward the bed. Had any other woman shared it with him? Thinking he lived the life of a monk was beyond all reason, but she also knew he hadn't had a steady woman in his life since his divorce.

She stood there for a moment, debating whether or not to pry into his private life. She didn't like misusing her gift. But who would know? Of course, she may not like what she discovered...

Placing her palms flat on the mattress, she closed her eyes and concentrated. The pictures soon came. Vince sleeping. Vince tossing and turning. Vince snoring like a DC10. Vince staring at the ceiling, sitting down to pull on his socks and shoes, reading over some notes on a case ... always alone. Somehow the knowledge made her slightly sad. He was obviously a loner. Alone. Lonely?

She backed up a little, still staring at the unmade bed. Julie knew what it was like to be alone and lonely. Her solitude was both by choice and circumstance. Most of the men she went out with couldn't handle her gift, or they simply disappointed her when she picked up bad vibes and discovered they weren't really who they had portrayed themselves to be.

But her gift also gave her the clues she needed to help the authorities find murderers, kidnappers, drug dealers, and rapists. The very gift that told her Vince was different. That they belonged together. If only she could break through that lone-bull exterior of his.

She knew once all of the evidence was found and pieced together, once the child was located and his abductor captured, Vince would send her on her way and that would be the last she'd see of him. Though she wasn't in the habit of chasing men, this was an exception. She only had a very short time to convince Vincent Marcelli to take a chance with her.

Whenever she was over at the LAPD helping out on a case, she'd sometimes see his hulking figure stalking the corridors. Heard the stories about the no-nonsense cop who resigned from the police force because he wasn't a miracle worker and couldn't change the world over night. After ten years of trying and fighting and losing, he grew tired of the paperwork and illogical legal system and went into private investigations.

He was a man who lived by his own rules, worked his own hours, took orders from no one. He was magnificent. Gorgeous. Sexy as hell. And Julie wanted him. Bad.

When she entered the small, brightly lit kitchen, a laugh rose in her throat. Vince's massive form stood before an apartment-sized stove in the midst of dishing up what she supposed was dinner. "You look completely adorable." The words jumped out before she

could stop them. She doubted he would take it as a compliment.

He turned around; one plate in each hand, placing them on the small dinette table located three feet from the stove. He looked up at her and smiled. "Thanks for the compliment, although I can't remember a woman ever considering me adorable." He pulled out one of the two chairs, motioning for her to have a seat. "I've been called stubborn, bullheaded, reclusive, a bastard, the list goes on, but ... adorable?" Vince lowered himself into one of the chairs upholstered with a mustard, lemon, and brown paisley print.

"Yep," Julie assured him, sitting also.

Vince sat there for several seconds simply staring at her with a blank look on his face. Clearing her throat, wondering if she'd made him feel uncomfortable, she asked, "What did you make?" She directed her attention to the plate of food in front of her. Fork in hand, she poked at various items. "I was only gone about five minutes."

"The chicken was from last night. So, keeping your *channels* in mind, I reheated the baked lemon-pepper chicken, nuked some broccoli, and threw together a tossed salad with olive oil and wine vinaigrette, and," he grinned, "Pillsbury crescent rolls. Leftovers also." He pointed to the individual items on, as well as beside, her plate.

"Wow, you're quite capable with a spatula, aren't you?" She was truly impressed. "I have a hard time not burning scrambled eggs."

He laughed. "Well, I got tired of frozen dinners after about a year of bachelorhood, so it was a matter of survival."

"Milk?" Her eyebrows shot up in surprise, noticing the white liquid in the glass he sipped from.

He swallowed and set his glass down, eyeing her suspiciously. "You've got something against milk?"

"No, not at all. In fact, I drink it all the time. I just figured you'd have a case of beer stocked in the fridge."

He stabbed a broccoli stalk with the tines of the fork and rolled his eyes. "Thanks for the compliment, but I'll have you know I gave up drinking three months ago, smoking, too. Not that I did much of either."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean anything by my remark. I was just teasing you." She smiled.

Vince looked down at the napkin in his lap, muttering something unintelligible under his breath.

She chuckled, enjoying the fact that she could get him all flustered. "Dinner looks delicious." She took a bite. "Mmm... I'm starving. Readings always make me hungry." She dug into her meal as if she'd been on a lifelong fast.

Vince dropped his fork on the checkerboard linoleum floor and said a few cuss words in Italian.

"You look really uptight." She took a bite of her roll, chewing.

"This is a tough case, that's all."

When he remained quiet for too long, pretending to be interested in his meal, Julie said, "Is it?" He glanced up.

"Well, yeah."

"Okay." She scanned his face, not totally convinced.

Rubbing his palm over one hair-stubbed cheek, he admitted, "I also didn't expect you to be the real-deal. I thought you'd be a seventy-year-old crone and that I'd get rid of

you as fast as I could."

"And ... is that good or bad?"

He held up his hands in a surrendering gesture. "Damned if I know."

Julie swallowed, eyeing him with curiosity. "Meaning?"

His brows looked permanently welded together. He played around with his salad.

"Well, you just may be able to help me solve this blasted case." His fork landed on the plate with a clatter.

"That is the idea, right? That's why I'm here."

"Well, yeah."

"So..."

"So that's the idea and we'll get to the reading as quickly as we can." His words came out rather harsh, making Julie jump.

"Sure." She stared down at the food on her plate.

Vince reached across the table, grabbing her hand. She looked at him. "Thank you for helping me out."

"No problem." Immediately she brightened. Vince smiled in return.

They ate in silence for a few minutes until Vince's cell phone vibrated in his pocket. He took it out and flipped it open. "Hello? What?" He let out a huge sigh, now standing.

"Sure. Tomorrow is fine." He clicked off and looked at Julie.

She held up a hand. "Let me guess. The Scotts canceled out?"

"You got it." He flopped down into the chair, stuffing the phone back in his jeans.

"For people who supposedly want their kid back, they sure aren't very cooperative."

Julie pushed her plate back, finished. "When do they want us to go over there?"

"Tomorrow." Vince was beyond frustrated.

"Okay, let me call a taxi."

Vince frowned at her. "Where's your car?"

"I don't drive."

"Really?"

Julie knew he was surprised. How many people, especially Californians, didn't drive?

"It's hard to operate a vehicle with heinous images popping into my mind all of the time." She leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms over her stomach. "I'm very sensitive. If I drive by or over a spot where an act of violence or a fatality happened, I pick it up full-force. Try keeping your eye on the road when you're experiencing a hit-and-run, drive-by, or holdup as if you were actually the victim." She felt a shadow pass over her, but it was gone in the next instant. "So, I rely on my parents, a taxi, or public transportation."

"I don't blame you." Vince glanced at her clean plate and gave a half-smile. "I'll take you home," he quickly offered.

"Are you sure? I don't want to be any trouble."

"No trouble." He reached into the front pocket of his jeans and took out his keys. "It's the least I can do since our meeting has been pushed back."

"Don't you want me to help clean up?" She felt a bit off balance since it seemed he was now ushering her out of his house.

"Nah, it'll give me something to do before working on some other cases." He stood now, looking tense.

"Thank you." She looked around for her purse then remembered it was in his office.
"I'll grab my purse on the way out."
She felt flustered and confused at his change in attitude. He reached out and grabbed her by the upper arm. "No, thank you."
Julie made a soft sound, biting on her bottom lip.
Vince let his breath out in one big whoosh. "Let's get you home. Now!" He turned and started walking toward the front door.
"Are you always this uptight?"
"Only since this morning."
She let out a short laugh, her smile one of victory.

Chapter Three

Except for directions, the ride from Vince's house in Montebello to Julie's in Pasadena was spent in silence. Julie's gaze slowly went back and forth from the familiar scenery of magnolia and Chinese elm trees, showered by the glow of early evening sun, to the quiet man beside her.

She knew he had to be feeling upset about not getting the reading done tonight. And maybe for a couple of other things she wasn't privy to.

"There it is." She broke the silence around them. "It's the yellow one with the white trim." She pointed to a three-storey refurbished house with gingerbread trim. Years ago it had been divided into two separate homes, as were most of the older homes in the area. It was the elaborate Victorian style of many of the houses here, along with the antique brick business buildings of the downtown area that gave this part of Pasadena its charm and appeal. And Julie never tired of it.

Pulling up in front of the place indicated, Vince switched off the motor.

"So, I guess I'll see you tomorrow?" Her gaze took in his harsh features.

"Yep." He didn't turn to face her.

"Okay," she said in frustration. "Do you want me to meet you at your place?"

"Nope. I'll pick you up."

Julie sighed heavily. "You know, all of that tension is going to kill you. You need to meditate or something."

Slowly he turned his head in her direction, pinning her with a sharp look. "Or something."

He stared straight ahead once more.

"I have a headache and this sudden strain between us is getting to me." Giving up on the situation, she reached for the door handle, but stopped and looked back at him. She hated leaving with this dark mood hanging over them.

When he didn't speak, she said, "You're really weird sometimes, you know that?" She was hoping to get closer to Vince while they solved this case together. Instead, in the span of one short afternoon, she felt he was just growing farther away. Julie tried to read him, but his body looked stiff.

"Get used to it." He turned his head, looking out of the window at his side.

She gave a small smile. "Maybe I will." And with that she exited his Cherokee, closing the door behind her. The walkway seemed at least a mile long, but she suppressed the urge to look behind her to see if Vince was watching. As she stepped onto the porch and had the door unlocked and opened, she heard him take off.

When she entered her living room, she closed the door and leaned heavily against it, letting out a deep breath she didn't know she had been holding. She wasn't sure if the hours spent with Vince had been good or bad. Right now she didn't want to think about it.

After switching on the kitchen light, she retrieved the teakettle from one of the bottom cupboards, and put some water on to boil. A soothing cup of chamomile tea is what she needed to calm her nerves.

Tonight she needed a peaceful, dreamless sleep to recover from all that had happened over this day. She didn't need to spend the night dreaming of a blue-eyed

Italian who made her blood boil with lust and frustration.

She had no idea what the following day would bring, with the case or with Vince. After a moment of chaotic thinking, she gave up trying to divine the future.

Julie jumped when the teakettle whistled. Mechanically, she went about making the tea, trying to keep her mind off Vince. When she wasn't in his presence, there really wasn't much she could do about their potential relationship, except get herself all worked up with worry, wonder and what-if. And there was nothing she could do to further the case until they had some information to go on.

Sometime later she crawled between the covers of her canopy bed, untying the pink veil-like curtains so she was cocooned within the huge bed. For many years horrific scenes often followed her, stealing into her unconscious mind, replaying themselves over and over again until she barely slept on those nights. This magnificent, fairytale bed was her way of keeping out the boogeyman and ensuring pleasant dreams for herself. It always worked.

With a stifled yawn, she closed her eyes, snuggling deeper beneath the covers, trying to ignore the empty feeling of being alone in this great big bed.

* * * *

The next morning Julie showered, changed into an Indian print skirt and camel gauze blouse then brushed her hair back into a ponytail. She touched her face up with a little makeup, applying a shimmery cherry-colored gloss to her lips. Humming a little, she reached into the top drawer of her dresser and retrieved a pair of socks. She felt wonderful after a dreamless night's sleep and hoped that nothing would happen today to spoil the mood.

Vince was due to pick her about around eleven, and they would go to the Scott's. What would they uncover today? Would they at last find the details they would need to find Tommy? Or would each and every piece of evidence have to be painstakingly extracted from an unknown number of objects, if at all?

Pushing those thoughts aside for now, Julie slipped on a pair of brown canvas sneakers and decided to go next door to bum breakfast off her folks and chat awhile before Vince arrived. Closing the front door behind her, she walked the ten feet from her house to theirs, not bothering to knock, and walked right in as she usually did.

She started toward the kitchen where her parents usually congregated this time of the morning, but the sound of giggling in the living room caught her attention. A look to her left as she entered the room caused her mouth and eyes to pop open in unison.

There were her parents—her over-seventy parents—on the living room couch necking and groping like a couple of teens!

"Mom! Dad!" Julie held out a hand and put it flat against the wall. It was the only thing holding her upright.

"Julie!" her parents said in chorus, heads jerking up from their supine position. Annie Simmons wriggled free of her husband's hold, scrambling to get off him.

Herbert Simmons merely flashed his daughter a grin of macho pride and said to his wife, "Looks like we've been caught, sweet-cakes."

"We—we weren't expecting you, dear." Her mother nervously tucked the stray locks of snow-white hair back into the ponytail she usually wore it in.

"Obviously!" Julie flushed, wishing she could rewind time and knock first.

"Yeah, ain't it great?" Her father's eyes shone brightly with something Julie didn't even want to speculate on at the moment. He stood in back of his wife and whispered in her ear, though Julie heard his words perfectly, "And we don't even need Viagra."

"Now, Tiger, not in front of Julie," Annie reprimanded, throwing her husband a look of reprimand that was purely playful. She directed her slightly embarrassed expression back on her daughter. "Why don't we have some coffee and a couple of those blueberry muffins I baked last night?"

"Tiger? Sweet-cakes?" Her parents had never acted this way before, at least not around her. In fact, she didn't think her parents did that sort of thing anymore. What if she had come over just five minutes later? She probably would have caught them right in the middle of... "Sure." Julie let the thought slip away. It was none of her business. "Vince won't be here for another hour or so."

"Yes, did I tell you, dear? Julie finally met that Vincent Marcelli we've heard about for the past few years." Annie tipped her head back, directing the question to the man towering behind her before addressing her daughter. "How did it go, dear?"

Julie suppressed a smile and small laugh. Obviously her parents still cared for each other in a way she thought they had given up on long ago. The knowledge warmed her heart. "Okay, I guess."

"Before you say anything else, let's go into the kitchen where we can talk over some of those muffins." Her mother led them to the immaculate room where they all took a seat around the glossy table.

While they drank her mother's special mocha-coffee brew and ate muffins bursting with ripe, juicy blueberries, Julie replayed the events of the last twenty-four hours—minus the fact that she was trying to get emotionally, as well as intimately, involved with Vince.

"We're going over to the Scott's in just a bit." Julie glanced at the clock on the wall that looked like a fried egg with a spoon for the hour hand and fork for the minute. "There has to be something there that will give me some relevant information," she said more to herself than her parents. She looked up from her cup and frowned. "We have to find this boy."

"Do you think he's in danger?" her father asked, downing his third muffin slathered with butter. Didn't he know how bad that stuff was for him? Julie thought in dismay.

"We have no idea about her mental state. What sent her running away with someone else's child? A person who's capable of kidnapping could be capable of just about anything." Her thoughts grew distant for a moment.

"Do be careful, dear." Her mother reached across the small table to lay a hand on Julie's, concern there in her light eyes.

"I will, Mom. The first hint of danger and I'm outta there." She smiled brightly, hoping to put her mother at ease, though she knew she was sticking by Vince's side through all of it, no matter what ended up happening. "I know you're worried because of what happened after that last case I worked on." Julie saw her mother stiffen. Her father stopped chewing for a second. "This is different, though," she assured. "I'm actually helping someone who's still alive." She only hoped he would stay that way.

"Besides," she continued on a cheerful note, "Vince is big enough to scare away a dragon, yet alone one psycho woman." She laughed, then let out a dreamy sigh as she thought of Vince.

Her mother asked, "I know how you feel about Detective Marcelli, but how does he feel about *you*?"

Julie absently stirred the cream around in her coffee. "Well, I only got to spend a few hours with him yesterday, but I honestly think he has no idea what to do with me." Her lips twisted in a crooked smile. "He'll come around."

"I certainly hope so," her mother commented, standing to clear the empty cups and crumb-laden plates. "Maybe the two of you could start a relationship."

"Here! Here!" Herbert interrupted, lifting his cup of coffee in salute. "Then maybe she'll quit mothering us!"

"Herbert!" Annie's gaze landed on her husband. "Julie's regard for our health and well-being is because she loves us."

He picked up his newspaper. "Yeah, well, I'm not too keen on having our smooch sessions interrupted." He peeked from behind the paper barrier to pin his daughter with an accusing look.

"Oh, Herbert." Annie blushed.

Julie groaned and looked up at the ceiling.

"Just be careful, honey." Annie faced her daughter. "Perhaps we can meet Mr. Marcelli soon?"

"How about today?" Herbert threw in, looking over the top edge of the paper again. "Didn't you say he was coming by to pick you up?"

"Yes, but I'd like to wait awhile if you don't mind. Vince is pretty much a loner. Meeting me was a big step for him." She grinned, knowing she was a handful.

"He needs time to work his way up to meeting my folks. I'm not scaring him off before I get a chance to win him over!" She laughed, squelching the little voice that warned against the second muffin she lifted to her lips. She also squelched the voice that wondered where anything would go with Vince, if at all.

"Posh!" her father exclaimed. "If I know you, you'll have him eating out of your hand in nothing flat." He flashed a dimpled grin that matched Julie's as the three of them laughed.

Chapter Four

Less than an hour later Vince's shiny black Cherokee pulled up in her driveway. After he got out he walked around the other side to help Julie up into the monster. Yesterday he had been parked at the curb, adding about twelve inches, making it easier for her to climb in and out, although not in a very ladylike fashion. He had evidently observed her struggle, since he offered his assistance without a word from her.

Julie noticed he'd had a haircut this morning, as the ebony mass stood up in stiff spikes all over his head. She found the new style even more attractive. It gave him a slightly wild, untamed look that added to his tough and sexy appearance.

He was encased in another pair of blue jeans that were nearly bleached white from age and a red t-shirt with the sleeves rolled up, revealing his firm upper arms. She saw a tattoo that hadn't been revealed before. It was an American flag in red and blue with the words, *These Colors Don't Run*, beneath it. Julie found it nearly impossible to tear her appreciative stare from him as he came around to give her a boost.

She touched the mark on his arm. "Where'd you get this?"

When his hands tightened around her waist, she could see the reflection of her own desire in the lenses of his aviator sunglasses. His expression, however, was hidden from view, his mouth in a slightly tight line. "I was an MP during the shit in Beirut back in eighty-three. I got drunk with some buddies one night. We were all pretty pissed about the crap that happened there, and felt incredibly patriotic at the time."

He deposited her on the seat of his Jeep as if she was nothing more than a basket of laundry, giving the door a slam. Evidently he had done some thinking last night and had built a wall between them thick and wide.

Julie growled in frustration, a huge sigh followed.

The cold, hard cop was back, but she refused to bend under his wrath and vowed to stay positive—even if she did feel like strangling him right about now.

During the drive to San Marino, Vince seemed to relax a bit. Julie was sure to keep her mind on the task at hand, the air punctuated with small-talk, mostly about the case. Mentally she cleared out anything that could get in the way of a good reading. Her mind constantly wandered to the quiet man beside her, but she needed to let go of the invisible lure Vincent Marcelli had over her—at least for the next hour or so.

Vince stopped the Jeep in front of the new-model home. Julie let out a low whistle when she saw how luxurious it was. She knew San Marino was one of the wealthiest cities per capita in the United States, but this home must have cost a couple of million dollars, easy.

It was a three-storey brick home with intricately carved white pillars holding up the roof of the portico. The emerald-green front lawn was professionally manicured and landscaped to perfection with a winding flagstone path bordered by a rainbow of pansies. Every window wore the same stiff uniform of snow-white fan shades.

"Pretty grand, huh?" Vince commented.

"And then some! I bet they have a couple of maids just to clean the place."

"I know they do." Vince shut the motor off.

They climbed out of the vehicle, Vince's exit a tad more graceful than Julie's as she

slid the full three feet to the ground then treaded up the walkway. A huge German shepherd barked his head off from behind a chain link fence at the side of the house. They saw June Scott standing on the sprawling front porch, her eyes red and swollen. She held a good supply of tissue in her left hand.

Poor woman, Julie thought. It must be heart-wrenching to have your child kidnapped, especially by someone you had trusted. Julie gave a silent promise to do all she could to find the boy, regardless of any physical or mental side-effects she might encounter.

They joined the woman on the porch. "Mrs. Scott, this is Julie Simmons, the psychic I told you about." Vince sounded cool and all-work as he took the woman's trembling hand in his own for a brief shake.

Julie wondered how he could not let himself get emotionally involved in any of his cases. It was a fact that bothered her to no end simply because she yearned to be so impartial when it came to such things. Maybe if she could disassociate herself from others' grief, she would be more willing to help out with the police department again. Maybe if she could separate herself from the role of the victim, she wouldn't become so completely drained and have to spend days or even weeks recovering from each case.

"Pleased to meet you." The woman smiled tremulously from a face void of makeup, though her hair and clothes were neat and fashionable. Julie took her hand, giving it a slight up and down movement before letting go.

"I'm so sorry," Julie offered, always feeling awkward at facing such situations. Evidently it was the wrong thing to say for the woman burst into tears. Vince's eyes were wide on Julie while she merely looked back at him helplessly.

A moment later, Mrs. Scott had herself under control. "Come in, detective. Miss Simmons." The woman sniffed, leading them inside. As they entered, Julie's eyes latched onto the Old Italian and Spanish surroundings, no longer wondering why they had a guard dog that acted as if he'd rather tear your face off than have a friendly pat on the head. She bet just one of the items in this room cost more than all of her furnishings put together.

Evidently, Mr. Scott made big bucks doing whatever it was he did for a living, Julie mused as she took in the plush surroundings. She felt as if she had walked into a museum. Above her the ceiling was wood beamed and stained a rich brown. Under her feet the flooring was made to look like distressed boards. And all around the walls were hand plastered, uneven and rough.

The doorways were gracefully arched and an assortment of antique furnishings and artifacts graced the room. No cozy, lived-in look to this place, Julie thought to herself as she passed by a tapestry hanging on the wall that was probably well over four-hundred years old. She was afraid to touch anything for fear she'd leave a fingerprint behind.

"Where's Mr. Scott?" Vince asked. Julie saw a thin man with a head full of sandy hair standing at a bar that looked like a massive wooden door to a Renaissance dungeon on its side. His back to them, he drained a glass of what she assumed was liquor.

Vince had told her that Robert Scott started drinking heavily ever since their child was taken. If they didn't get Tommy back soon, she was worried he'd end up an alcoholic over the incident. He couldn't be very much comfort to his wife, either, Julie thought somberly, with her husband always being in a drunken stupor.

Hearing his name, Robert Scott ambled toward the three of them, another drink

clutched in his hand. June Scott cast an apologetic glance at Julie and Vince, clearly embarrassed with her husband's newly acquired hobby.

Instead of greeting the people who were determined to find his son, he plopped down into a nearby leather chair, consuming his drink in one long swallow. After setting the glass on the fat coffee table, he washed a hand over his face, obviously uneasy.

"Please, sit down." June Scott gestured to a wide-whaled corduroy sofa in a forest green. Vince seemed unimpressed by the posh environment and Julie didn't find it surprising. He'd prefer that tired recliner of his over any of this, she was certain. Inwardly she smiled at the knowledge.

They took the offered spot while June took a matching chair opposite from them, next to her husband.

Vince withdrew a small notebook from his shirt pocket, sliding a pen from its home in the spiral spine. "If you don't mind, I'd like to go over the information you gave me last time. I realize we were very thorough, but you never know, I might have missed something that could offer some clues." He directed the question to Robert Scott, though he seemed oblivious to anything around him, so Vince turned his attention to June once more.

Julie stood up, feeling this would be the best opportunity to look around. "I hope you don't mind if I check out Tommy's and the nanny's rooms. I'd like to collect a few things. See what impressions I can pick up."

"Of course." June started to rise, but Julie's next question stopped her.

"Would it be alright if I looked around myself? It would make it easier for me to concentrate on items."

"I just don't want anything disturbed."

Though the woman's statement was more of concern than accusation, Julie attempted an air of humor. "I won't break anything, I promise."

"I didn't think otherwise, Miss Simmons," she said securely. "It's just ... well ... I just don't want Tommy's things..." She couldn't finish her sentence as another bout of tears claimed her.

"I won't touch anything unless absolutely necessary," she softly assured.

June nodded her go-ahead. "Cynthia's room is through the hall and to the left. Tommy's is next to hers."

Her last words were terse and solemn, probably for the fact that she had put them so close together and trusted the woman in the first place, Julie suspected.

As Julie left the room, the sound of Vince's deep, velvet voice as he questioned the couple drifted to her ears. Between his thorough investigating and her psychic gift, she was sure they would find Tommy Scott. She just hoped that they would find him before it was too late. In fact, she hoped that he was still alive.

Early in her career she had discovered where a kidnapped child was concerned that the motives behind the abductor were always twisted, and very often deadly.

In fact, most children never survived the first twenty-four hours. The gruesome thought made her shudder deep inside.

Yesterday when she had arrived at Vince's, optimism poured through her veins. But could it be that she was just so taken with the opportunity to finally meet him that she hadn't wanted to believe otherwise? That she only chose to believe that this case could have just one ending, and it was a happy one?

She wasn't sure, and braced herself for any potential bad vibes that may be slung her way as she entered the nanny's room.

Walking around the bedroom that was the size of her own living room and kitchen put together, Julie held her hands above different objects that caught her eye, waiting to feel any unusual energy from one or more of them.

Her palms came to hover over a powder compact on the Italian-style credenza sitting against one wall. Images of a young, blond woman came into view as she rested her fingertips on the elaborately detailed silver case. Julie could see her clearly as she closed her eyes. The woman was humming some silly romantic tune as she sat on the edge of her bed preparing for what Julie supposed was a date.

She could feel the woman's inner excitement as she touched the powder to her face, could feel the anticipation as if it flowed through her own veins. She seemed deeply in love.

"Sweet," Julie mumbled to herself, but it was nothing to give her any clues as to where she took the boy. And it sure wasn't a scene she would have expected to witness from a kidnapper. She had fully expected to feel some sort of mental chaos, but hadn't encounter that, at least not yet.

Gliding her hands over books, perfume bottles, even the bed, she only caught glimpses of a woman in her everyday life, performing everyday rituals.

Her eyes came to rest on the closet door. After opening it, she discovered not much was left. The few items remaining had been thrown about in a helter-skelter fashion, indicating the woman had been in a tremendous hurry to leave. Julie lightly touched a hanger that had been broken in an attempt to rip the article of clothing from it. Only one item remained hanging.

Julie slid her palms over the short, blue velvet dress. "Nothing." Glancing up at the top shelf she saw it was empty. With a look down she encountered a pair of well-worn moccasins. Bending to pick them up, the vibrations started. As if sticking her finger into an electrical socket, she jerked her hand back, not eager to find out what information the shoes held, yet needing to know at the same time.

She looked at the items and smiled. It always was shoes that made the biggest impact on her, gave her the most information. She figured the reason was because the majority of the body's heat was lost through the extremities, therefore leaving the biggest impression.

Julie left the shoes where they were. She'd have Vince carry them out for her since any contact she made with them would result in instantaneous engulfment for her. Julie then went to Tommy's room.

Crossing the threshold, she sucked in a breath of awe, feeling as if she had been transported to a miniature carnival. Circus-themed paper covered the walls, while a myriad of stuffed animals poked their furry faces through the bars of the circus boxcar that was the child's bed. It was a small boy's dream come true, she was sure, being surrounded by such merriment. This festive room promised no monsters lurking under the bed or in the closet, assuring a sleepy child nothing but cotton candy dreams.

She smiled as she took in the happy atmosphere around her, but the smile quickly vanished as she remembered that, as of late, this fanciful room had been sadly empty.

Julie walked around, hands held in front of her as she let them hover over different objects. The toy box was piled high with an assortment of items. A bright-yellow ball the size of a cantaloupe held her attention for awhile as she held it in her palms, eyes closed,

viewing a family picnic. Tommy was playing catch with his father, the boy's small legs running over the grass to retrieve it as he missed the yellow sphere once again. They were there, just the three of them, laughing and spending family time together.

A frown formed between Julie's brows as she looked at the man and woman now sitting on the green and red plaid blanket spread on the grass. The man who was smiling widely was definitely Robert Scott, but the woman wasn't his wife. In fact, it was the same eager woman she had just witnessed moments ago applying her makeup. The woman known to the Scotts as Cynthia Marlow.

Setting the ball back down, Julie let the suspicion slip from her mind. So what if the nanny had accompanied Robert and Tommy Scott on a picnic? After all, she was hired to watch over the boy. There was no strange reason why she wouldn't be along on many of the family trips.

Clearing her head of any made-up notions, knowing it would only cloud her readings, she went over to the closet to see if any of Tommy's clothes or, preferably, shoes could shed some light on the case.

She blew out a defeated breath. Everything in the closet was gone. Julie told herself it was a good sign. If the nanny meant the child any harm, she certainly wouldn't have taken his clothing. Evidently, the woman intended to keep Tommy, but why? What would make somebody so young do something so compulsive? So cruel? So criminal?

Julie walked to the master bedroom, laying her hands on everything in sight, trying to capture a picture in her mind that might prove valuable. She walked over to the king-sized bed with its scrolling brass headboard and black and blue swirled comforter, picking up nothing. Evidently this bed hadn't seen any action in quite some time, as she got the distinct impression of only one body sleeping here nightly.

The dresser held nothing out of the ordinary. The closet was dismally the same. She was just about to give up when she saw a pair of black velvet heels laying at the bottom of the enclosure. Reaching down, the energy leapt up her arm. Yes, these were full of possibilities.

She'd have Vince take them as well.

Leaving the room, she went to the kitchen. It was just as fabulous as the rest of the house, with honed limestone counters in a dark gray, and a shiny professional stove taking up the center of the room. But other than the impressive decor, it was void of anything worthwhile that would help them locate Tommy. The laundry room was the last place that seemed to beckon her.

Her eyes took in the usual paraphernalia of washer, dryer, detergent, bleach, and liquid fabric softener. An assortment of clothes sat folded atop the dryer, while some had been tossed carelessly into a wicker laundry basket near the back door.

Julie rifled through the clothes on the dryer, coming up empty until she tried the basket, finding a pair of red sneakers covered with dust.

Tentatively she let her hand come in contact with them until images snapped into her mind. "Another jackpot," she murmured, breathing a sigh of relief and trepidation. What would these items reveal to her in the next few hours?

Memories flooded back of cases she had helped out within the past. One specifically brought a tremor to her soul. She had been asked to help out on a family homicide case, which meant she had to go to the scene of the crime and lay her hands on every blood stain in that downtown Los Angeles apartment. They caught the guy, the estranged

husband and father, with her help, but she had nearly lost it.

It was the last case she had worked on. The last case she swore she would ever work on ever again. She had ultimately recovered after a year of therapy and a month long stay at...

She sucked in a cleansing breath, knowing that no matter what happened, this time around would be different. She hoped. And as long as it brought her closer to Vince, she'd deal with whatever came her way.

As she left the laundry room and walked back in the direction where Vince and the Scotts were, she stopped short just before entering the living room. Her ears picked up an agitated Robert Scott having a very firm discussion with his wife and Vince. Over his son's disappearance, she suspected. As Julie listened closer she realized he was talking about *her*. Calling her a two-bit fortune teller who just said what people wanted to hear in order to rip them off!

Of all the nerve! Here she was trying to help them out, to find their missing son, and he's calling her a fraud behind her back?

"Tell me, June, how much money are we going to have to pay her? Is a tarot reader next? Perhaps some Voodoo? Maybe we can call in the Pope!" The bitter accusation was directed to his wife who still sat next to him, though he stood towering over her at the moment, face twisted with rage. Vince was at June Scott's side in a protective stance as Julie watched on, staying just out of sight. "You won't be happy until you've blown every cent we have on every crackpot that claims to have divine knowledge and paranormal gifts promising to get our son back!"

"Doesn't our son mean anything to you?" June choked out, sounding incredulous at her husband's lack of compassion for their own child.

"Now look here, Scott." Vince took a step forward. "I realize that you've been under a great deal of stress lately, but that gives you no right to badmouth Miss Simmons. She's a close, personal friend of mine and I can vouch for the authenticity of her psychic abilities. She's helped solve numerous cases with the LAPD and FBI."

Julie smiled wryly as Vince continued to defend her honor. Why, just yesterday he was the one calling her a crackpot! Now he was assuring Robert Scott of her sterling reputation? As for being his close, personal friend, she was working on that. Well, at least the close and personal part.

Robert gave a caustic snort. "I suppose you believe in the tooth fairy also, detective?" he dryly shot back.

June Scott cried again.

That does it! Julie fumed. This was the second time in two days she had been referred to as a crackpot, and it got under her skin like a rusty sliver.

In three strides she was in the living room. A few more brought her to Vince's side, looking into Robert Scott's gray, bloodshot eyes, fists planted on her hips in anger. "For your information, Detective Marcelli is taking care of my service fee, you won't be paying me one cent. As for being a crackpot, when you have your son back and the woman who took him behind bars, along with her full confession, I thoroughly expect an apology."

She may have been a bit hard on the guy. After all, his son had been kidnapped, but it disgusted her to know that he was drinking himself into a coma, leaving his wife to handle the burden of the situation alone. The fact that he'd called her unflattering names

behind her back didn't help.

Robert Scott's eyes seemed to widen in panic and Julie wondered why. Certainly not because she was a five-foot squirt attempting to stand up for herself. No, it was something more. Something she had said? But what could it have been?

"Get the hell out of my house." He looked down at her, but didn't appear quite as angry as before. In fact, he sounded rather weak and defeated.

Before Julie had a chance to dwell on his strange behavior, he stalked away in the direction of the bar.

"Did you find anything?" Vince stood at her side, looking antsy. "Are you ready to go?" He took her by the arm, whispering out of the corner of his mouth, "That woman is driving me nuts. And what's with that husband of hers? He has her wound up tighter than tight."

Julie shrugged. "Yeah, I'm ready to leave. There's a pair of black heels in the closet of the master bedroom, a pair of moccasins in the nanny's room, and a pair of red sneakers in the laundry basket in the washroom. Could you get them for me?"

"Sure." Vince obliged, looking grateful to get out of the stifling atmosphere in the living room. He walked away, leaving Julie and June Scott together while Robert Scott gazed absently out the front bay window, the glass filled with amber liquid glued to his lips.

"I'm sorry about that." The other woman turned to look at Julie, her voice unsteady as she apologized. "He's been like this ever since Tommy..." Her eyes fell to her clasped hands resting on her lap.

"There's no need to apologize. I understand. It's very painful for the both of you." Julie felt so much sympathy for this woman. "I promise, I'll do all I can. I'm very optimistic that we'll find him."

"Do you really think so?" She lifted her head and Julie saw in her eyes a glimmer of hope.

Julie only nodded, wanting desperately to not let this woman down.

A minute later Vince was back, shoes in his hand. "Ready?" His eyes were on Julie. He seemed reluctant to look at Mrs. Scott and Julie knew he felt uncomfortable.

Julie's greedy gaze took in his lean hips and those muscular thighs flexing beneath the pale denim as he walked in her direction. Her blood ricocheted through her veins and shot her clit dead-center. Her breath caught in her throat and she couldn't speak; only nodded. Now was not the time for hormones to rise to the surface. Would it ever? She wondered.

Turning back to June Scott, feeling the need to comfort, she said, "I have a good feeling, Mrs. Scott. We'll do all we can to find your son."

"I know you will." She closed her eyes for a second. Julie recognized the expression. It was the look of a woman who had been through too much and was hanging on by a thin thread and nothing more. She recalled the horrible pictures of a mother and three small children stabbed repeatedly by a madman. Crimson splattered over the walls and steeped into blankets and pajamas. A teddy bear in the crib soaked in baby's blood. Her stomach twisted at the memory. She shoved the images away as she had learned to do, tucking them into that make-believe box in her mind, locking it and mentally tucking the key away.

"Mrs. Scott, if you believe in me at all, please trust me when I say that your son is

still alive. We just have to find him." She wasn't giving the woman false hope either. She knew Tommy was still alive, somewhere, that much she knew from the few brief flashes she had allowed to enter her head when she'd seen the shoes just now. The woman wouldn't hurt the boy.

But ... what would she do when she realized she had been found out? How far would her obsession push her? She had seen it happen before. Love was a powerful emotion. One could kill in the name of it in the blink of an eye and feel no remorse. She prayed this wouldn't be one of those instances.

Mrs. Scott looked from Julie and back to the items clutched in Vince's hands. Julie figured the woman thought she was weird for choosing to take shoes for a reading, but they had no time for explanations.

"I said—get the hell out of my house." Robert Scott still faced the street, his voice low and tired.

"Let's get out of here." Vince grabbed Julie's hand as he made his way to the front door.

Nearing the fireplace, Julie spied a key ring laying on the mantel. It seemed to call out to her. She glanced at Robert Scott and saw that he was still gazing out the window, engrossed with his inner thoughts. June stared at her husband's back with deep sadness on her face. Reaching out, Julie grabbed the keys, fighting back a deluge of emotions and pictures that flooded her mind, all battling for top priority in her brain.

June Scott ultimately followed, the three of them walking out to the porch. "I'll call tomorrow and let you know what she picks up," Vince told her.

"Thank you." She sounded grateful.

When they reached the SUV, Vince threw the shoes into the back and opened Julie's door for her. In the next five seconds he was seated beside her, sticking the keys in the ignition and driving away.

Julie dropped the keys onto the floor near her feet, trying to erase the panic and misery she felt by simply holding the items.

The pictures were too jumbled at the moment to make any sense of them, but she had felt the emotions emanating from the small objects. Rage, fear, love, hate, grief, all in the extreme, radiated from the pieces of metal.

She would be sure to read them last. If not, she may become too weak to concentrate on the shoes.

Holding a fist to her mouth, keeping away the sob she felt rising in her throat, she looked blankly out the window as they drove along the streets, wondering, not for the first time, if this was such a good idea.

Vince reached out and held her hand. "My place or yours?"

The playful proposition was ignored as Julie turned her head to look at him. She smiled feebly. "Yours," was her too-quiet reply. She squeezed the big hand encircling hers, glad he was here with her during this, knowing if it wasn't for him, she wouldn't be doing this in the first place. Ecstasy and agony, that's what Vincent Marcelli made her feel.

"My place, it is," he said in a deep whisper.

Chapter Five

Once they were at Vince's place, Julie gave herself a chance to unwind. She was tied up in a million knots. Vince looked it, too, as he ignored her altogether, treading toward the kitchen. Without asking, she knew he was on his way to make a pot of coffee.

Tugging off her shoes, she plopped down on the sofa, her eyes riveted to the shoes sitting on the coffee table. She wasn't looking forward to this. Her palms moistened and her heart picked up speed at just the thought of what she may discover in the next few minutes. Maybe with Vince here it wouldn't be so bad.

A few minutes later the object of her thoughts strode out of the kitchen, handing her one of the mugs he carried. "Thought you might need this. I know I do. Sorry I don't have any whisky to put in it. We sure could use it right about now."

"This is fine." She took a sip, hoping the caffeine would rewire her nerves in a different direction.

Sitting down in the brown nubby recliner across the room, Vince scalped a hand through his hair. "I swear this is the first and last case like this I'll ever work on. I can handle fraud and infidelity, but this..." He shook his head, casting her a woeful look. "And the way Robert Scott is acting. I can't read that guy. All I know is the tension in that house was thick enough to suffocate in. This has been rough since the start and keeps getting worse."

"I know." She let out an acidic laugh. "Just think," her eyes met his, "we haven't even started. But, you've exhausted all leads." Her tone grew solemn. "You asked for my help. I'm here to do a job."

"It's true. The future of that kid and the incarceration of one deranged woman lay in your gifted hands." Vince glanced at the shoes sitting on his beat-up coffee table. "That all you find?"

"Afraid so. The nanny took most everything else."

"Doesn't look too promising."

They sat in silence for a moment, knowing they were stalling, each for their own reasons ... for the same reason. Julie was afraid of her reaction to what she might find. Vince was afraid of his reaction to what she might find. And they continued to sit.

Finally, Julie broke through the tense quiet. "Well, here goes nothing." She scooted forward to the edge of the couch and set her mug on the table.

"Maybe you'd like to eat first. I always work better on a full stomach." Vince, too, was on the edge of his chair, wiping his palms on his denim covered thighs.

"I fully intend to collect on that offer, after I'm done." She started to raise her hands, but stopped in midair. "Vince, do you think you could come over here and sit by me? For moral support?" She gave a lopsided smile, feeling scared.

In a heartbeat Vince was at her side, his nearness a talisman against any emotional trauma she may be facing within the next few minutes.

With him by her side, his strong and stable aura reaching out to her, Julie felt safe and laid her palms on the moccasins. Her eyes snapped shut and energy shot up her arm, making her jump as pictures sprang into her mind.

She saw the young woman again. Tommy was with her. They were at a supermarket.

Cynthia seemed frantic. Where was Tommy?

For a moment her thoughts wavered back and forth between her own and the other woman's. Ultimately she shifted positions in her mind, now experiencing the other woman's fear. She could hear her calling Tommy's name, but it was five in the evening and the store was packed.

"It frustrates the hell out of me, not being able to see what you're seeing. What's going on? Tell me." Vince's words went unanswered as Julie was too steeped in the commotion playing out behind her eyes to reply.

Cynthia stopped every person she encountered, out of her mind with worry.

Where is he? Panic welled in her chest as she wove through the crowd of strange faces. "Tommy!"

Running down one aisle, her eyes scanned brightly colored detergent, bleach, fabric softener bottles and boxes. She knew from this moment on the scent of them would turn her stomach, just as it did now.

A Hispanic woman stood before a soup display. Her son hung on the side of the shopping cart. "Have you seen a little boy with blond hair?" Cynthia was in the woman's face.

"No." The woman shook her head and backed away.

"Have you?" She touched the boy and he scrambled to his mother's side, lifting his green striped shirt over his face. Cynthia cursed in frustration and ran down the next aisle.

In front of the coffees and creamers she grabbed an old lady by her shoulders and shook her. "Have you seen a little boy!" she screamed now. Her blood raced through her veins, quick and hot, while perspiration trickled down the sides of her face.

The elderly woman didn't reply, but fear stood in her eyes as Cynthia's harried face hung before her, demanding an answer. "Never mind!"

She raced down two more aisles, knocking down a display of dry packaged dinners, but uncaring. Finally she spotted Tommy as he stood near several racks of toys.

The young child looked up at her and smiled. "Hiya, Cindy." He held up a package containing a blue racecar. "Can I get this?"

"Tommy! You scared me! I thought someone took you from me." Cynthia hauled him up in her arms and wept with sheer relief. "Don't you ever do that to me again!"

"Awww, I'm sorry, Cindy." The boy wrapped his small arms around her neck and hugged her.

The scene faded to black and all was quiet in Julie's mind.

The episode she had just witnessed wasn't a major one, but it was enough to give her an idea of the woman's intense feelings for the small boy since she had felt them coursing through her own body. It bordered on obsession.

Dragging a shuddering breath into her lungs, Julie opened her eyes, leaning against Vince for the very reason that she felt the need to, the desire to. "It was nothing monumental," she began in a weak voice that grew stronger as she continued to absorb some of Vince's strength.

"Okay. Would you like to go into detail or are you going to teach me how to be psychic?" His tone teased and Julie felt grateful. It lifted some of the weight from the chaotic feelings of the other woman still lingering inside her.

She sat up straight and smiled. "No, I like our roles very much. I'm the psychic,

you're the detective. I'm the woman, you're the man," she played, but went serious again. "Tommy was lost at the supermarket and Cynthia was frantically searching for him. And, after that reading we now have a glimpse into her emotions as far as Tommy's concerned." She looked up into eyes that had her breathing erratically again.

"What's your opinion of her feelings towards the boy?" Vince prompted when she stayed quiet for too long.

"I think she would do anything to keep him, though I have no idea what prompted her to kidnap him in the first place."

"Are you saying she may be dangerous once we track her down?"

"I don't know enough yet." Julie shrugged, tucking her hair behind her ears. "But it's highly possible." As much as she hated to admit it to herself, she didn't want to take another trip into that woman's head, but knew she would be.

Vince seemed to be chewing over the bit of information. "I didn't like getting you involved in the first place, and I like it even less now that we could be dealing with a potential psycho. Don't shake your head at me like that!" He closed his eyes tightly and leaned his head back against the couch. "Woman, you're hell-bent on turning my life upside down, aren't you?" He looked right at her. "You're doing a bang-up job of it, too."

Julie started to speak, but Vince stopped her before she could open her mouth and offer a heated remark. "Did you pick up any info that might give us a clue as to who she really is? Why she faked her ID and stats? Where the hell they could be?"

"No." She felt a little discouraged by the way things were going. "She seems to have stepped into the assumed identity as if she'd always been Cynthia Marlow." Julie laughed, though it held no humor. "In fact, I think even she believes she's always been Cynthia Marlow."

Her eyes landed on the remaining objects.

"You don't want to do this, do you?" Vince asked. Cupping her shoulders with his palms, he massaged them gently.

"I want to help you, Vince. I want to find Tommy Scott." She sighed. "If I could just stay impartial, it would make things so much easier. I hate feeling everything the victims do. All of their pain, their fright." Her body trembled slightly. She looked down.

Vince took her chin between his thumb and forefinger, lifting her face until their eyes met. "It'll be okay."

Julie nodded, almost believing him.

"Now, why don't we have some lunch before getting to the other items? I'm starving." He made a pained look of hunger.

"Sounds good. And I can put this off a little longer." She laughed softly at her weakness.

*

"Why don't you go freshen up, or whatever it is that women do in the bathroom for so damned long, while I dig up some food." He made sure his tone and actions were that of a caring friend, or even a brother. He needed Julie for her psychic talent right now. He also found himself desiring her as a woman, but he wanted his thinking to be clear. There was no way he could give in to the heated look in those coffee-colored eyes of hers.

And he continued to convince himself of that fact while he watched the gentle sway of Julie's hips as she left the room.

Vince turned on his heel and started toward the kitchen, muttering a disgusted curse

as desire ricocheted off every nerve and came to pool in his balls.

He stomped over to the refrigerator. He needed a beer. Jerking open the fridge, he came face-to-face with milk, several bottles of cola and spring water. "Damn!"

Grudgingly, he pulled out a bottle and twisted off the cap, taking a long swallow of the carbonated liquid. It didn't help one bit. In fact, the sweetness left on his lips only made him wonder what Julie's kisses would be like. Irrately, he swiped his mouth with the back of his hand, trying to wipe away the sugary flavor that left him craving the real thing.

He prayed that by the time she emerged from the bathroom he'd have his run away sex drive under control, since the tightness in his jeans was nearly unbearable. His dick jerked at the memory of her body pressed so closely against his as they sat on his couch just moments ago.

Slumping down into one of the kitchen chairs, he scrubbed a hand over his face. It was already starting. His mind was becoming preoccupied with thoughts of her.

And they hadn't even shared in a simple kiss yet. Yet. "Double damn!"

* * * *

After they finished the sandwiches, they sat at the kitchen table, sharing in Vince's beverage staple of coffee.

"Tell me about your wife." Julie wanted to prolong the moment before testing the items waiting in the next room. And she wanted to know more about this man and his life.

"Excuse me?" He didn't look prepared for this line of conversation.

"Your wife, what was she like?" Julie persisted over the rim of her cup. She rarely drank coffee, but Vince seemed to enjoy it, while she herself enjoyed the cozy atmosphere the ritual presented.

Vince spread his hands on the table, avoiding her eyes. "There's not much to tell."

"Did you love her?" She cupped her chin in her hand, elbow braced on the table, eyes on Vince.

"I don't know." He looked at her and shrugged his wide shoulders, Julie following the fluid movement with an appreciated gaze. "Not in a fiery, all-consuming way, but I suppose I did. I don't regret the divorce, hell, it was inevitable, but it makes me think about the mistakes I made." He gave an impatient sigh. "Julie, I don't like dissecting the past."

For a moment they sat there looking at one another, Julie watching as Vince closed himself off while she mutely tried to probe deeper. She eventually gave up though, smiled brightly, and stood up. "Shall we adjourn to the living room and start on those readings?"

"What?" He blinked several times, looking at her, baffled.

"The readings," she reminded.

"Oh, yes!" Vince stood quickly, the spindly chair legs scraping against the linoleum as he shoved it backward. "We have work to do." He sounded appallingly relieved that their minds and conversation were going to be detoured for the next hour or so. Julie felt sick to her stomach.

He strode ahead of her, planting himself in the safety of his beloved chair, leaving her to take up the couch on the opposite side of the room, alone.

Sitting on the middle cushion, her blank stare glued to the objects in front of her, she knew the time was now here. Enough fooling around, she reminded herself. She had stalled as long as she could.

Taking in a steadying breath, she reached her hand out to take the pair of black heels. When her fingers were within inches of them, she dropped her hand, looking at Vince who seemed a million miles away. He had the blinds closed and that tacky lamp of his on, illuminating the room with a golden glow, casting soft light and harsh shadow over his face, making him appear tougher than he did in daylight. He looked so big, so invincible. This man was her rock.

"Vince, come sit next to me, please." He looked wary, hesitated for a second, but came to take the spot directly beside her.

"What can I do to help?" His tone sounded flat and unattached.

"Just lend some moral support like last time." She knew by the time this reading was over she would be drained to the core, but felt a wave of security wash over her as he sat beside her. She felt his body heat mingling with her own, his energy wrapping around her, and took fortitude in the serene feeling he generated as she reached her hand out to grasp the velvet shoes.

Closing her eyes to concentrate more fully, she let her mind go blank to everything around her, letting the pictures seep into her brain until they were the only thing occupying it. She was only vaguely aware of Vince fiddling around at her side, taking out his notebook and pen.

With great ease, she let the images flow.

Julie frowned as she studied the scene in her head. These were June Scott's shoes, but she wasn't wearing them, at least not in this particular scene.

Her grip on the shoes tightened, her mind in a whirlpool being sucked down farther and farther. She was no longer in Vince's living room as she looked around and recognized the Scott's bathroom, but the eyes looking back at her in the mirror weren't her own. The excitement coursing in her body belonged to another woman. The man walking up behind her, putting his lips on her neck, was not Vince.

Cynthia giggled and turned in his embrace. "I'm so glad June and Tommy went to her sister's for the weekend." She put her arms around his neck, her loving gaze taking in the crinkles at the corners of his eyes that she found so appealing.

"Me, too." He planted kisses along the front of her chest and the skin exposed by the low line of her dress. "Gives us time alone."

Running her fingers over his silk tie, Cynthia met his eyes with an arched brow. "I can't get enough of you." She pulled on his tie, bringing his head down to stick her tongue in his open mouth.

She felt his fingers digging into her hips, pulling her close to his hard cock, pushing her against the sink. The marble jabbed into the small of her back, but she didn't care, he wanted her again and that pleased her to no end.

"Do you love me?" she asked innocently.

He grew rigid for a second, his eyes on hers. A slow smile spread over his lips. He tipped his head to the side. "You know how I feel. You shouldn't have to ask."

Cynthia let out a small laugh, feeling foolish for doubting him. "I know."

"I love you, Robert," she whispered as he lifted her to the sink, unzipped his slacks, and slid his dick into her.

The vision faded and Julie slumped against Vince, inhaling a shuddering breath. "The nanny was wearing these shoes." She already felt spent and had two more readings to do.

When she was silent for too long, Vince prodded. "So the sitter borrowed Mrs. Scott's shoes?"

"That's not all she borrowed." Her eyes were wide as they met Vince's, her lips pressed in a thin line.

"What's that supposed to mean?" He moved restlessly beside her. "Quit being so stingy with the information, I hate dragging everything out of you."

"Seems she was also borrowing Robert Scott."

Vince let out a surprised breath. "You're kidding? But, he's old enough to be her father."

"He definitely has a thing for young girls in high heels."

"What a sleaze. It's bad enough having an affair with a kid, but he also has a wedding ring." He shook his head. "Guess that doesn't matter much to him."

"Now, now." She reached out to pat his thigh that was pressed so closely to her own. "She's over eighteen."

"Anyone under thirty is a kid to me."

Julie smiled and shook her head in amusement at his comment. "Well, we're not here to judge this man, we're here to find his son, and hopefully to make some sense out of all this." Her eyes drifted shut as she spoke, "Who knows, maybe this experience will bring them closer together."

"Do you think his wife knows about the affair?"

"I don't know." She looked at him. "I doubt it. That's probably why he's been so irate lately and hitting the liquor." Julie added, "She was wearing these shoes when they had sex." Her brows lifted high. "On the bathroom sink."

"Uh-huh." He looked uneasy. "You saw all that?"

"And felt it," she conceded, wrinkling her nose.

"It's weird to imagine that you can actually see, hear, and feel everything—even if it is only in your mind."

"Cynthia was in love with him." Julie changed the subject since Vince seemed a little uptight. "He could do no wrong in her eyes. He was a very selfish lover," she commented. "My opinion."

Vince grunted, looking rather peeved. Julie found a small sense of satisfaction in the show.

"That's it for these." She rolled her shoulder to work out the stiffness. Vince placed both of his hands on her neck and started rubbing the tight muscles there with just the right amount of pressure. "Mmm, that feels wonderful, but we need to get on with our work."

"Sorry," he offered, taking the blue notebook and pen from the pocket on his t-shirt again then scribbled a few notes in there. He looked at Julie expectantly.

She set the red sneakers on her lap. Her body jerked a little as her mind quickly filled with scenes. "I think we have something, Marcelli," she whispered softly for fear of breaking the trance. She sat up straighter. "I see her in a desert town, paying an old woman money for..." She squinted and leaned closer as if training to hear a faraway conversation.

"It's not a very emotional scene, so it's a little fuzzy." It was easy to stay impartial in this instance and Julie was glad. "She's paying rent on a trailer. She's telling this woman that she and her son will be moving there in just a couple of days."

"So she had this all planned?"

"Evidently."

"Can you make out where this trailer park is?"

"It's in ... Nevada. Las Vegas."

"Great!" He wrote it down. "What's the name of the trailer park?"

"I feel like I'm reading the small print on an eye chart. I don't know. I can't make out the sign. I do know the older woman, apparently the manager, lives in a green and white trailer right at the entrance of the park. Cynthia rented a Silver Streak on the opposite side. That's all I can make out."

Vince sighed, leaning back. "Do you know how many trailer parks there are in Las Vegas?"

"A lot?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I could tell that it was on a main street on the very outskirts of the city. We'll just drive around until we find a trailer park with a white and green trailer and a Silver Streak at the very front of it." She tried to make it sound easy.

"We?" His brows lifted.

"You're not going alone. We're in this together, remember? Besides, what if she's not there? You'll need me to pick up the scent once we're out there. Also, my brain works like a TV antenna. The closer we get to the place, the clearer my visions will become."

Vince sat, looking stubborn and not budging, but he finally gave in. "True. I may need you. In fact, sounds like I will."

Julie clapped her hands in delight. "When do we go?"

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" She was disappointed.

"We need to get all the rest we can. No telling how long we'll be on the road." Vince looked at the key ring sitting on the table. "What about those?"

Julie's smile faded as she cast a look of dread at the silver and gold objects that were suspended by a BMW emblem. "What about them?" She hated the fact that she had taken them in the first place. Although she was sure the keys would shed some light on this whole situation, she wasn't looking forward to the reading. The energy from them was ten times more intense than the shoes.

"Was there something about these that looked encouraging?" He picked them up, not experiencing the same wave of intense emotion that she had when she'd touched them.

"I'm sure they'll give us some answers to the how's and why's of this whole situation between Cynthia and Robert Scott."

"Don't be afraid," he whispered against her ear. "I'm here." He took her hand, laying the keys in her right palm, closing her fingers around them. Her body instantly tensed. "Concentrate on these and tell me what you see," he spoke against her hair, holding her closer.

"I—I see them arguing in a car," she began in an unsettled voice. "The feeling is so sad, so angry, so fearful..." She went silent, propelled into the past.

"I thought you'd be happy." Cynthia sat in the passenger seat of the BMW staring at

Robert. Nausea grew in the pit of her stomach.

"Why the hell would I be happy?" Harsh lines carved his face and his eyes lit up with fury. He was a stranger.

She pleaded with him. "Robert, this is the opportunity we've been waiting for! You can get your divorce now." Her confused gaze took in his sandy hair and strong profile. She wanted to reach out to him. To run to the nearest motel and make love as they had done so many times before. To erase the anger she saw now, replacing it with a look of passion.

They sat in the parking lot of a supermarket. Robert glanced out the side window, but turned his head slowly to pin her with a hard look. "You don't get it, do you?" he sounded incredulous.

"Get what?" Cynthia was really baffled. She lifted an arm, trying to touch him, but he slapped her hand away. "What's wrong? I'd thought you'd be happy." The smell of the leather car seats and his cologne filled her lungs; scents that always brought a thrill to her, knowing that once again they would slip away for a few hours of secret love. Now the smells deprived her lungs of the oxygen she needed to stay focused.

"You're getting rid of it." His tone left no room for argument.

"What!" A hand flew over her mouth, her eyes wide with fear.

"I will not have some little whore ruin my life!" His face was red as he leaned forward, pointing at her.

Cynthia shook her head, pressing herself against the door. Tears ran down her cheeks. "Why are you doing this?"

He inhaled a deep breath through his nose and slowly let it out. His eyes closed for a moment and he mumbled under his breath, "I can't believe this is happening." His accusing gaze was on her again. "I thought you were on the Pill."

She trembled, her eyes darting. "I—I forgot a couple of days."

His hand came down hard on the dashboard. "You fucking moron!"

Her head nearly hit the roof as she jumped. She thought he'd be happy. Thought they could pursue the life they'd been talking about for the past few months.

But things were turning out so badly. So wrong. "It's not supposed to be like this!" She became hysterical.

"You're getting rid of it," he said lowly, his eyes on her stomach.

She slid her hands down to her belly in a protective gesture, moving her head back and forth. No words would come. Her mind went inside, mentally cradling the tiny fetus growing inside her.

"I will make your life a living hell, Cynthia." It didn't sound like a warning, it sounded like fact. And she believed him with her whole heart. "I'll screw you over in more ways than that little mind can ever conceive."

"But—but I thought you were leaving her to be with me," she said on a tiny whisper. She felt herself shrinking. "I thought you loved me."

A snort of disbelief was followed by, "You really don't get it, do you?"

"What?"

"You were an easy lay, that's it. Nothing more, nothing less." He loosened the burgundy tie around his neck and Cynthia eyed him with suspicion. She didn't know what to expect from him now. She really didn't know this man at all.

"Now, you have one choice and one choice only." He slid the tie from around his

neck and held it taut between his hands. Memories of him tying her up with that very tie as they played around with some light bondage swirled around in her mind. That moment was such a sharp contrast to what was happening now. The look on his face at this moment was purely malevolent.

"You do it my way. You get rid of that," he nodded at her abdomen, "and you leave my house."

"What if I don't?" A moment of defiance bobbed to the surface, her chin high.

Robert wrapped the tie around one fist, deep red against tanned flesh. To Cynthia it looked like his knuckles were soaked in blood. Her blood. Their baby's blood. "You ... will." And that was that.

In that second every ounce of fight left her. She felt like a lump of flesh and nothing more. Whatever threat lay there in his eyes, she knew he would make good on it.

"Okay." She forced a tiny smile of surrender then relented. "If I get the abortion and promise to keep quiet, will you let me stay?" Her voice caught as she said, "I don't have anywhere to go."

He looked at her suspiciously. "Yeah. Sure."

Then all was dark.

Julie dropped the keys to the floor, a shattered look in her eyes as she sagged against Vince.

"What happened?" Vince gently shook her shoulders, holding her away from him. He pulled her close again as tears slid down her cheeks.

"How could he do that?" she asked in a tremulous voice. "Robert Scott made a world of promises to her that he never intended to keep, just so he could get her into bed. When I saw them arguing, it was because she told him she didn't want to get an abortion. She intended to keep his baby." Julie looked up into eyes that were slightly confused and very, very angry. "He—he forced her to have an abortion, Vince, and she loved the baby, loved Robert." Her voice hitched with her last statement.

"He never wanted his wife to find out about the affair or the conceived child. As soon as the dirty deed was done, he fired her, warning her to never show her face again, or else. I really believe that taking Tommy was her way of getting revenge, a way to keep a part of the man she loved and the baby she had lost."

Julie felt drained, just as she had expected, but was glad to find more pieces to the puzzle. She went to sit up, but Vince held her tight. It didn't take much for her to relinquish.

"You saw all that?" He scooted into the corner of the sofa and leaned back, bringing Julie to lie against him.

"I felt it, too, though I felt Cynthia far more than Robert. She must have handled the keys more than him. Maybe using the car to run errands while he used one of the other vehicles he owned," she gave explanation but got back onto the true issue at hand.

"I felt her love for Robert, and her naive joy of finding out she was pregnant. I could feel Robert's lust for the young girl, his panic when she told him of the pregnancy." Julie laid a hand over Vince's heart, needing to feel the life pulsing there.

"I felt her confusion when he rejected her, her horror when he ordered her to have the abortion. His heated rage when she refused, his extreme relief after she agreed to have it done. I felt it all."

"No wonder you stopped doing this. You're a mess." Vince rested his chin on top of

her head, Julie let out a soft breath of relief.

She looked up at him. "I want to help you."

Vince leaned closer, his warm breath caressing her lips. Julie tried to formulate something that would make sense, but when her mouth opened only a tiny sigh escaped.

"Julie..." He reached out, sliding his fingers through her hair, grabbing a handful of it, making her gasp. He said her name again, pulling her close to him, bringing her lips a mere whisper from his own.

She felt his arm tighten around her waist. His gaze penetrated hers and she knew he was trying to find something there in her own. She reached up to touch his cheek and his eyes opened wide for a second as if he found what he was looking for. And his lips touched hers.

Julie ignited deep inside. She felt him jump and knew he felt it too. For a few agonizing heartbeats he ran his lips back and forth over her mouth, softly teasing, holding himself back, until Julie thought she'd go insane. Finally, he pressed his mouth to hers. Julie sighed as his tongue slid into the warmth of her mouth. With seductive movements he investigated every nook and cranny before entwining his tongue with hers.

She met his every move with one of her own, her tongue tasting, seeking, discovering. Her hands skimmed over his arms, feeling firm muscle beneath the soft cotton of his t-shirt. Turning slightly so she could feel her breasts against his chest, that solid wall of strength filled her bones with liquid fire.

For several moments they kissed until they shuddered, both wanting so much more. Drawing back only slightly, Vince looked down at her. "That was very, very good." He stroked her hair. "You've aroused something in me that's completely taken over my senses."

"That doesn't sound so bad to me." She tilted her head back so she could look at him.

"It is bad, Julie." He frowned and stiffened, inhaling a trembling breath. "I can't do this. Not now. I need to keep my brain fog-free." He smiled crookedly.

Julie sighed and tried to pull herself away, but Vince held her tight. Trying to make light of the moment and not feel too let down, she said, "You're no fun."

He snorted. "You're too much."

She stuck her tongue at him then rested her head against his chest, feeling worn out.

*

They stayed silent for a long while until Vince felt Julie relax in his arms. Her breathing became slow and even. She had fallen asleep, emotionally spent.

A rueful smile skimmed his lips. For a moment he thought of waking her and taking her home, but immediately trashed the idea. He would bunk on the couch. The idea of her sleeping in his bed was more than he could resist.

He entered his room, laying her on his rumpled bed. Her shoes lay abandoned in the living room. After covering her with the spread, he looked down at her, her slumbering presence beckoning his company.

Vince shook his head and left her to sleep it off, intending to go over the evidence they'd uncovered, and take a shower to take the edge off of the tension that had his every muscle tight and his brain in a thousand knots.

Standing under the spray of steamy water, he was still in a state of amazement at Julie's talents. She had uncovered with her special gift more information in a couple of hours than anyone had in the past month. She was amazing. And she wanted him. *Him.* A

crusty ex-cop who was a pro at detective work and a novice at romance. The thought thrilled him and terrified him at the same time.

The bar of soap slid from his hand and down to the drain as he stared blankly at the beige tile. Water sluiced over his body, offering no relief from his tangled mind. He let his thoughts turn to the case. Evidently Robert Scott's recent actions had been for a very good reason. He wasn't too eager to have his wife find out about his affair and child that almost was.

What about the young woman? Had she been so miserable that she sought her own brand of revenge by kidnapping her lover's child? What was she planning to do now? Keep him as a surrogate child? Perhaps demand a ransom in time? Take her own life or the kid's, or both?

His head throbbed and the water pouring down over him was now only lukewarm. He felt exhausted. It was nearly nine. Julie had fallen asleep hours ago. He needed sleep. Tomorrow, if luck was on their side, they would find the boy safe and have his kidnapper in custody.

Once again he wondered if he was a fool for agreeing to take Julie along with him in the first place, but he had to admit he needed her psychic talents. Other needs that scrambled to the surface, begging for satisfaction were promptly squashed and kicked away. They were this much closer to finding Tommy Scott and closing this confounding case. And he was just as close to getting his life back to some kind of normal.

After shutting off the barely tepid water, he climbed out, dried off, slipped on his usual sleeping attire of boxers, brushed his teeth and padded into the bedroom, keeping his mind and eyes focused on his good intentions and not the inviting woman sleeping in his bed. Grabbing a pillow and blanket, fully intent on spending the night on the lumpy old sofa, Julie turned on her stomach, one leg bent and her skirt riding high on her hips.

Vince stumbled at the sight of her bared leg illuminated by the light out in the hall. Her pale skin looked so tempting...

He walked over to the side of the bed, running the tip of his index finger over the length of her thigh. Julie moaned. Vince's heart thudded at the erotic sound.

He took two steps backward and continued staring at her. Holding the pillow tight against his chest, he let out a defeated sigh, knowing that his previously normal life no longer existed, nor would it ever again.

Chapter Six

The next morning found Vince still alive, though tension filled his every move as he went about the task of making a pot of coffee. Julie still lay sprawled out on his bed, just as she had throughout the night. On his many trips to check on her during the evening, he had noticed that she snored. He grunted bitterly as he scooped coffee grounds into the paper filter, taking perverse solace in the fact that she wasn't perfect. It rerouted his mind and hormones off the path of desire.

What else didn't he like about her? He ruminated as he poured water into the back of the machine. She left her shoes and socks right on his living room floor as if she lived here. He switched on the coffee maker. She was short. She was far too spunky. And she was the biggest damn flirt he'd ever met.

With a soft curse he admitted that those were the very things he found so utterly bewitching about her.

He started rummaging through drawers. He didn't care what good intentions he'd had three months ago, he needed a cigarette, bad. And he found one. Flat and twisted, it was stuck way back in his junk drawer. With a sigh of relief, he took it out, straightened it as best he could, lit one end with a stove burner, and took a long, shaky drag.

He closed his eyes and held his breath, letting the sharpness of the smoky tobacco linger in his lungs. Seconds later a cough forced its way out. Vince grimaced as nicotine air swirled around his face. He tossed the cigarette in the sink, running water over it to extinguish the lit end.

It tasted like crap.

Feeling grumpier than ever, he poured a cup of the strong brew that had just finished dripping and took a seat at the dinette. While he waited for Sleeping Beauty to rouse herself, he intended to go over his notes once again, not that they would turn up anything new.

Less than ten minutes later the person of his extreme stress and strain ambled into the kitchen, looking comatose. Her eyes were still half-closed and her hair was a tangled mess and hung in her face. She should have looked like hell, Vince mused as he gripped his cup in one unsteady hand, but, dammit all, she was sexy as sin. Looking all sleep warm and sheet wrinkled, he had the overwhelming urge to carry her back into his bedroom and make slow, passionate love to her until the sun went down again.

Vince cast his attention to the nonsensical words on the notebook lying on the table in front of him, he tried to ignore her.

Julie, oblivious to his mental and physical state of tension, walked over to him and placed a kiss on his clean-shaven cheek then stumbled over to the counter to pour a cup of coffee as if she had lived here for the past ten years. Trudging back to the table, she slid into the chair opposite from him.

Vince scowled. He didn't like it. Didn't like it one damn bit. She was getting comfortable. Acting like they were married. As though this was just another sleepy morning in their life together. He jabbed a hand through his hair, wanting to pull it out by the roots. This woman was making him crazy without even trying!

"Morning, Marcelli." She cast him a sleepy-eyed glance. Her voice was deep and

husky early in the morning, he noticed. A honey-thick sound that flowed along his skin, all the way to his dick, making the tip tingle.

Vince grunted an acknowledgement, picked up his notebook and pretended to become engrossed with the list of evidence he had made. It looked like Arabic to him.

"How was the cigarette?" She raised an eyebrow.

He shot a look at her from over the top of his notebook. "Lousy," he grumbled. "I threw it down the sink after one drag."

"Glad to hear it." She smiled, looking like a satisfied lover. "Tough night?" she asked, smoothing her hair back from her face.

"Tough night?" He shot to his feet and started pacing the small room, thrusting his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. "You snore," he accused.

When she looked at him like he was out of his mind, he added, "You talk in your sleep." He stopped and spread his legs wide, one hand on his hip, the other pointing in accusation. "Which would be no big deal, except for the fact that I couldn't understand a damned thing you said!"

He paced again. "I had to sleep on that lumpy old sofa, and—and you're driving me nuts, woman." He stopped directly in front of her.

"Hey," she began innocently, sipping on her coffee. "I'm not the one who put me in your bed last night. I could have very well slept on the lumpy sofa myself, or you could have woken me up to take me home or called me a taxi."

"Ha! Like that's possible. Once you're out, you're out. It's like Tyson gave you an uppercut."

She smiled demurely up at him. "I'm aware of that." Her look turned serious. "You can't imagine how many couches I've slept on in police and FBI departments over the years. Too numerous to count."

"You—" He pointed an angry finger at her. "You—" And he started pacing again.

"Yes?" She looked up at him with those big, brown, innocent eyes of hers.

He stopped in front of her again, glaring down at her. "You're going to be the death of me."

"Why is that?" She looked so serene, so casual, stretching lazily. Vince didn't miss the outline of her breasts, nipples straining against the thin fabric of her bra and top, as if begging him to free them from their cloth imprisonment. He swallowed air fast, afraid he'd pass out at any second.

"You're really stressed-out, aren't you?" she calmly asked.

"Yes," he said tightly. "I am very stressed-out, and it's all your fault."

"My fault?" she innocently echoed. Her eyes opened wider. "You aren't talking about my nocturnal actions, are you? I mean, you can't blame me for snoring or talking in my sleep or whatever. After all, I was asleep."

"Asleep," he muttered. "I've never met a woman who could get me all worked up the way you do while she was awake, yet alone in her sleep!" He slumped back in his chair.

"Really?" She looked fully awake now and Vince was mad as hell at himself for that little admission.

Getting up from her seat, she walked over to him and began massaging the rock-hard muscles of his neck and shoulders. "Look how tense you are." He made deep groaning sounds in the back of his throat. "Just go with the flow and let's see where it takes us," she leaned over to whisper against his cheek.

"No, I can't. Not right now." He got to his feet again, nearly sending Julie backward into the refrigerator. "I can't afford to have my mind more fucked-up than it already is. We have a case to solve, the last thing I need is to be haunted with memories of our lovemaking."

"Who said anything about making love?" She held a hand over her heart. "I'm just being me."

"Yeah, well, you being you is killing me."

Julie pressed her lips together then said, "Maybe if you did give into your feelings, it would relax you."

"Are you kidding?" He stared down at her. "That kiss last night melted my brain. One touch of your body and I'd be a total nut-bag." He walked toward the bedroom, grabbing a battered leather suitcase from the foot of the bed and walked back out. "Let's go to your place so you can grab a shower and pack." It was an order.

"So we're back to that again? You simply can't mix business and pleasure, can you?" She gave a shake of her head.

Vince ignored the questions he had no intention of answering. "We can get something to eat along the way." He stalked toward the door.

"Sure thing." Julie stood in the middle of the living room. "And I'm supposed to be killing you? Seems you're doing a great job of it yourself!"

"Are you coming or not?" He waited expectantly with the front door open.

"Yeah, sure." She went to get her sneakers, returning a moment later with an annoyed look on her face. "What a grouch!"

"Ah, bite me," he snarled, walking out to the Jeep.

"My pleasure."

* * * *

Julie walked ahead of him up the stone path. The ride to her house had been spent in uncomfortable silence. Vince pushed aside their kiss, the future, and the fact that Julie was pissed at him again, and smiled at the whimsical scallops on her home. The morning sun made the painted wood look as if it glowed from the inside out. It was a fairytale come to life, and fit her as well as his hands fit her...

Vince gritted his teeth and steeled himself as the memory of his hands on her body careened around a curve and sideswiped his brain.

His nerves on edge, he waited as Julie put her key in the lock and twisted it, opening the door in one swift motion. Vince found himself glued to the welcome mat. "Come on in," she said over her shoulder.

Feeling a little unhinged, Vince walked in. He felt out of sorts and tried convincing himself it was because his muscles were stiff from sleeping on the couch all night, playing the gentleman and allowing Julie the comforts of his bed.

And now, he stood in her living room.

When he caught sight of the warm, feminine decor of her home, his stomach bottomed-out. Compared to this, his place looked like a garbage collector's nightmare.

Lacy curtains hung at the windows, giving the whole room a bright and airy feel to it. The room was decorated in country style wood and floral. Vince knew what the particular scheme was called since he had seen a picture of a room much like this one in a magazine he'd picked up last week while waiting in line at the supermarket.

From the fat sofa, light oak coffee table and bookcase, to the grandfather clock and country theme lithographs on the walls, the room spoke of Julie. Soft, warm, inviting.

"Have a seat." She gestured toward the plump, flowery couch. Her bad mood seemed to have dissipated. Vince wasn't so happy with the knowledge. Having Julie mad at him would at least keep the invisible barrier intact.

"Thanks." Hesitating a moment, he finally sat down, perched on the very edge, feeling uncomfortable.

"Sit back and relax." She pushed off her canvas shoes. "You okay?" Her keys and purse were tossed onto the coffee table.

"It's so nice in here." He spoke as if in a library.

"Thank you. I want it to look comfortable and inviting, not intimidating."

"It does feel comfortable and inviting, that's the problem. I'm just used to my crappy place." Vince gave an uneasy laugh, sitting back against the couch. He felt stiff as a mannequin.

She blew out a breath of amusement. "Do you want anything to drink? I know we haven't eaten yet and I'm sure you're hungry, so I can fix you something. I make a great burnt egg omelet!" Julie teased and started toward the kitchen, but Vince's hand came up in the 'stop' position.

"Nah. I'm okay."

Julie pursed her lips. "There's club soda and apple juice if you're thirsty." She wagged her eyebrows and said in a sing-song voice, "I've got milk, too."

Vince couldn't speak, so he forced his head to move side to side in decline. He met the look of pure sunshine on her face. It was now a familiar expression telling him Julie was back in her bouncy mode, giving no indication that she felt any way about him except as friends, like they hadn't shared a mind-numbing kiss the previous evening and their more recent argument. How could she push aside her emotions so easily? And she thought he was weird?

That was okay. Besides, he reminded himself once again, hoping to get the message through his thick-as-leather brain, he was not in the market for a relationship, whether it be friends, lovers, or otherwise. He vowed to keep reminding himself of this fact as long as they worked on this case together.

And once it was over? Though he wasn't quite ready for an affair, he also wasn't eager to have Julie out of his life. Not just yet anyway.

"Want me to dump a couple of wastebaskets in the middle of the room? Maybe toss some dirty clothes on the floor?" she said playfully, bringing him out of his deep musings. "I want you to feel at ease." He was back on the edge of the couch.

Julie walked over to him, pushing on his shoulders until he was leaning back again. "There."

"Go take your shower," he urged needing some time and space away from her.

"Okay, okay. Here." She handed him the remote control. "Watch whatever you'd like. There are DVD's under the TV in the cabinet there. I'll be right out. I want to shower and change out of these clothes. I feel like I've been sitting in the bottom of a clothes hamper." Her mouth transformed into a devilish grin. "Be careful, there might be a porn in the DVD player." She disappeared from view.

"Make yourself comfortable." Her voice trailed after her.

Vince grunted, feeling about as comfortable as a man in an electric chair.

"Make myself comfortable," he said absently, pretending to concentrate on one of the magazines he grabbed off the coffee table. He rolled his eyes as he read the cover. One of the main articles caught his attention. *How to please your partner both in and out of bed.*

"If you find yourself bored, you can take my suitcase out to the car. I set it in the bedroom." Her voice sounded muffled from behind the bathroom door. "Be careful though, the lock doesn't always work." The shower went on.

"Okay, whatever," he muttered, flipping through the pages of the magazine.

Vince waited for so long he thought he'd need another haircut. He had already read the damnable article and was embarrassed to admit that he learned a few things. He also discovered that she was a liar. There was no porn in the DVD player. He was glad of the fact, much preferring the real thing over fantasy any day. His crime-fighting partner wasn't making an appearance, so he decided to kill some time by taking her case out.

As soon as he entered her bedroom he stopped short. His breath caught in his lungs. His hand shot out and grabbed the doorjamb as he took in the sight before him. It was a setting straight out of a fairytale. Everything around him bespoke of a nymph's lair, from the pale blue walls and ivory carpeting, to the vanity with its scrolling mirror frame and the padded stool in cream-colored velvet.

The bed was one he had never imagined even in his childhood fantasies. He walked over and touched the ultra-thin pink curtains, running his fingertips over the ivory satin sheets. Fragrant air filled his lungs. Every corner of the feminine room smelled like Julie—light and flowery. His mind filled with images of fairies flitting around a meadow. Imagined Julie spread out on that bed wearing nothing more than smooth skin and a sultry smile.

Shaking his head of every lurid scene that sprang into his overheated mind, he spotted her suitcase and grabbed the handle. Without so much as a backward glance at the sexually inciting room behind him, he started toward the front door. His grip on the handle was a little too tight, but he needed something to hold on to since his grip with reality was slipping away fast and furious.

Before he hit the front door, the lid fell open and all of her clothes tumbled out and onto the carpet.

"Dammit all!" He eyed the multi-colored heap with impatience then stooped down and started refolding various items. A couple pairs of jeans, t-shirts in various hues, socks, some underwear. He flushed and shoved them inside. His gaze landed on the final item; a peach lace teddy. His heart stopped for a microsecond before thudding into hyper-drive. His blood followed suit and shot into his dick.

He reached over, picking up the silky scrap of material. He always did have a thing for lacy lingerie. Imagining Julie in this particular number caused his groin to throb with uncontrolled desire. All of those sweaty scenes he tried so hard to banish crashed the doorway of his subconscious and paraded around in pornographic splendor.

Vince was paralyzed, crouched there on the floor, the cool wisp of fabric quickly heating beneath his fingers as he imagined her body would do. He pictured that little sprite laid out on the fairytale bed, her most intimate places revealed by the lace inserts of the particular garment he held in his hands.

"I see you have a thing for lingerie."

Vince jumped up, spinning around in surprise. "I—I ... uh..." He eyed the satin still in his hands and dropped it to the floor as if it were on fire. For a moment he stood there

like a kid caught masturbating but said coolly, "Yeah, doesn't every man?" He shrugged.

"I don't know, do they?" Her voice came out as silky as the fabric at his feet. She stayed in the hallway separating her bedroom and the living room. Though the front door was at his back, Vince felt strangely trapped, yet unable to move.

"I do," he stated, refusing to visualize what she now wore beneath that aggravating barrier of clothing. She was dressed in a pair of hip-loving jeans and a screaming-yellow t-shirt.

She took a few steps forward. Vince backed up a little, the doorknob digging in to his ass. "And I just happen to have a thing for plaid boxers."

"Boxers?" His voice crackled like it had when he was fourteen. "I thought women went for those G-strings that look more like an eye patch than underwear." He tried to keep his head straight and fog-free. He knew where this was leading, and damn him, he felt his excuses and his reserve slipping away.

"Not me." She stood three feet from him now; a slinky cat on the prowl. "I find boxers very masculine."

"Julie." The tone in his voice as he said her name was one of desperation. "I'd really like to pursue a relationship with you. A nice, normal, non-whirlwind relationship, after this case is over." He was holding up his hands to stop her, yet they seemed to be in a beckoning gesture more than a blocking one. He stuffed his hands in his pockets but somehow felt more vulnerable this way.

When she looked up at him with a small frown, he went on, "You know, going to the movies, out to restaurants, phone calls, getting to know your likes and dislikes. What your weaknesses are." Did the woman have any? She had the internal strength of a Mack truck plowing through a wall of soap suds at ninety miles an hour. Vince balked at his analogy. "Hell, I don't even know what your favorite color is."

"Okay, Marcelli." She looked up at him, a woman on a mission. "Since you're so hung up on the proper etiquette of pursuing relationships, my likes are Italian food and one particular Italian man. My dislikes are the pounds that Italian food adds to my hips, and the way that particular Italian man scrambles my brain. My favorite color is the same sapphire blue as your eyes." She was breast-to-belly with him now.

He opened his mouth to say something, but stopped. No words were there in his mind, only sensation. He was being pulled under quick.

"Oh yeah, and I have two weaknesses." She stepped back and grinned up at him. "Strawberry ice cream and you. Feel better?"

Vince just looked down at her in utter dismay. His dick jerked like Frankenstein's monster. No, he never stood a marshmallow's chance in hell at resisting.

And he wondered ... why was he resisting at all?

"The hell with it!" In one swift move Vince reached out and grabbed Julie by the waist, pulling her against the full length of his body. "I can't wait any longer." His lips came down on hers, hard and possessive. Julie gasped in surprise, melted, opened her mouth, inviting him in deeper.

Vince's mouth was everywhere at once. "We don't have any protection." God, he didn't want to stop now. Couldn't stop, but would if he had to. "That condom in my wallet probably looks like an old, cracked rubber band by now."

"No problem." She reached between them and ran a hand over his chest, her fingers sliding over one nipple. Vince sucked in a sharp breath. "I've got Norplants. Still have a

year left." She erased the only obstacle preventing them from the inevitable.

"I know we have to get going." He kissed and nibbled and sucked his way up and down her neck. Feeling a bit braver now, he slid his hands up her ribcage, his palms skimming the sides of her breasts. "But things'll be okay for a half hour or so." Her breasts now lay nestled in the palms of his hands and he gloried in their fullness, their softness. He pinched and teased her nipples through the cloth barricade. He ached to feel their silken texture more fully.

"Or so..." Julie reached down and gave his erection a squeeze, sliding her hand up and down the entire length of his shaft. She fumbled with the top button of his jeans, sliding the first metal fastener through its hole, breathing against his chest as his tongue made circles on the back of her neck. She slid the second and third buttons through their holes.

Vince stuck his hands into her hair, holding her face between his big palms, his eyes laser-hot on hers. "I need you." She started to open her mouth, but before she could say anything his lips were all over her face, kissing her cheeks, her chin, her nose, forehead and eyes with unrestrained passion.

His hands went under her t-shirt, his thumbs rubbing the tips of her breasts through lace. Her nipples were stiff and big. He loved big nipples, they felt good in his mouth as he sucked on them, loved to flick his tongue over them, loved how they looked as they stood in tight peaks. He had her shirt off in one quick maneuver that separated their heated bodies for only the briefest of moments.

Julie released the fourth and fifth buttons, her hands trembling as she slid the jeans down his big, hairy thighs, Vince absently stepped out of them, taking the opportunity to bite into her shoulder, bringing a deep moan from Julie.

Her shoes and socks discarded, as were Vince's, he went to work on her jeans, sliding them down. Julie grabbed the bottom of his t-shirt. "I need you naked." He helped her take off the barrier, throwing it aside in the pool of cloth that lay at their feet. Julie planted kisses all over his chest, licking his nipples, teasing them with her teeth.

"I need you in bed." Vince growled, lifting her in his arms, making his way to her lair.

This was happening way too fast, but he didn't give a shit. He had ached for this woman from day one and he would have her. He deposited her on the bed and pushed his boxers down, his erection springing forth.

She whispered words of admiration, holding out a hand in invitation, beckoning him to join her amongst the cloud of silk. Vince obliged, covering her body with his.

He kissed and licked his way over her neck and down her chest. "Very nice." He pulled his head back just enough to get a good view of the sky-blue teddy she wore. Another growl rose from his lungs and he turned onto his back, pulling Julie with him so she rode on top.

She smiled down at him, fire blazing in her eyes and between her thighs. Vince wiggled around a little, feeling her wetness on his stomach. She kissed his eyelids. Her lips moved to his left ear where she bit the lobe, making him to jump a little.

"You're so real," she whispered. She moved her lips to his mouth, her tongue sought his, and they shared another long, wet kiss.

Julie sat upright, her ass pressed against his dick. Vince put his hands on her hips, pushing her closer, a wicked grin on his face. "Yeah, *real* hard," he countered. He

reached up and pulled on the satin ribbons keeping the scrap of satin and lace in place. Suddenly Vince detested lingerie. It kept her body from view.

Now Julie was as bare. He put his hands on her breasts, her hard nipples pressed against his sensitive palms. "You're beautiful," he said in a throaty whisper.

"Have you ever had a woman worship your body?" Julie asked, sliding down. She looked up at him, a seductive gleam in her eyes. "I'll show you just how sexy I find you." Vince's chest rose and fell in quick, uneven patterns. "I find you very irresistible." She lay between his legs now. "Enjoy."

Warm fingers wrapped around his shaft. Her soft, wet mouth took him inside. Vince grabbed the sheets tightly; a long hiss forced between clenched teeth filled the room. She ran her tongue along the length of him, drawing little circles, dancing over the tip before he was swallowed up by her once again. He clutched handfuls of silken hair, guiding her along, pushing her down more and more with each motion.

"Julie! I've got to have you now!" With his next labored breath, Julie climbed on top, straddling his hips.

Vince let out a tremendous groan, attempting to sit up and take over, but Julie put her hands on his shoulders, pushing him back against the pillow. "I'm in charge this time, Marcelli. This time is for you."

At first Vince felt slightly off kilter. He was the man! He was supposed to take the lead, crushing her little body beneath his. But when Julie rose up a little then sat back down, the full length of him being gripped by that tight wetness, he decided to come out of the dark-ages and rejoice in this woman's sexual freedom.

"Oh ... Julie..." he moaned over and over again as she moved slow and rhythmically. Vince knew he'd orgasm within the next two seconds. He wanted it to last, so he forced himself to relax and hold on to reality. It wasn't working. Not at all.

He gripped the sheets tightly, feeling it was the only thing keeping him on this plane. "That's it, baby. Yeah... Just like that." Vince urged her on with words of lust until he exploded deep within her, the room around him spinning, colors bursting behind his eyelids. His fingers buried in the softness of her hips, he pulled her closer to him. A guttural cry of sweet release flew from his soul as wave after wave of ecstasy engulfed his senses.

Julie collapsed on top of him, her breathing as ragged as Vince's, a fine sheen of perspiration covering them both.

"Goddamn, woman!" Vince commented after he could find his voice and his breath. "What you do to me!"

Julie laughed softly against his damp chest. "I just know what pleases me and take it from there." She looked up at him, their eyes meeting, embracing. "You please me very much."

He grinned, his eyes creasing at the corners. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," she confirmed, offering a smile in return that showed off the dimple in her cheek that drove him wild.

Vince ran his hands over her curves, not surprised to find that he was hard again. With his next thought he frowned. "Were you satisfied?"

Julie moved up to lie beside him, propping herself up on one elbow. "Was I satisfied? Definitely."

"Did you come?"

"No. Is that weird in your book?"

He turned to his side, facing her, one arm crooked under the pillow at his head. "I just want you to be as satisfied as I am."

She trailed his jaw with a delicate finger. "Not every woman has an orgasm with intercourse."

"Hmm..." He mulled over the bit of information.

"You'll be pleasing me very soon." She waggled her eyebrows and they both laughed. "But I think we should get going."

Vince laid on his back and sighed deeply, looking at her again. "You're damn right I'll be pleasing you the first chance I get. I'm dying to climb between those soft thighs of yours and bury my face there."

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Julie inhaled a shuddering breath. "I can't wait," she said breathlessly.

"How would you like to meet my folks?" she casually asked, grabbing some underwear and a bra from the dresser, before walking back into the living room to retrieve her clothes. She slid back into her jeans.

"If they live close by and it doesn't take too long." He was already in his boxers and buttoning his own jeans.

"It'll only be a couple of minutes." Julie was surprised he accepted. Meeting someone's parents was incredibly old-fashioned, and Vince was definitely old-fashioned. She took it as a good sign.

She put on her bra and t-shirt. Disappearing for a second, she came back with a brush and began running the bristles through her hair. Vince seemed absorbed in the task. "Now, why don't we go meet my folks? I promise to make it quick. I just want to tell them we're off to Vegas and have them meet my crime fighting partner." She had her shoes and socks on, the canvas tennies the same color as the band in her hair. Vince slid into his t-shirt.

"I can't believe I trashed the thought of ever meeting you." He sat on the couch, putting on his shoes and socks. Julie noted a hole where his big toe peeked out and laughed to herself.

"Vince," she said from across the room at a safe distance, "if I didn't think I'd scare the pants off you I'd reveal the fact that I'm very much in lust with you."

Vince stopped in the midst of tying his shoelace and chuckled. "Yeah?" Though he tried to look unconcerned about the revelation, there was a crooked smile on his lips.

"Yeah." She nodded.

"Hmm." He bent his head, concentration on tying the lace of his shoe. "Good."

Julie threw her head back and laughed. "Positively adorable."

Chapter Seven

Vince walked ahead of Julie out the door. After she locked it, she turned left toward the door just a few yards from her own. "Where are you going?" Vince crossed the lawn to the Jeep.

He turned, pointing to the vehicle. "Aren't we going to see your folks?"

"Yeah."

"Then why are you still standing there?"

Julie put her hand on the warm doorknob, heated by the morning sun. "Because my parents live right here."

"What?" His upper body jerked back, eyes wide in surprise. He pointed at the door now. "They live there?"

"Yeah."

"Like, ten feet from you?"

Julie looked around, wondering why he seemed so flabbergasted. "Well, if you want to be precise about it, they're only some plasterboard and two-by-fours away from me since we share mutual walls."

She opened the door, not thinking about knocking even after the previous episode she'd stumbled upon. "Are you coming in or not?"

Vince walked stiffly toward her, looking like his joints needed oiling. "You okay?" she asked when he reached the porch. Julie already stood inside, holding the door open for him.

"We'll talk later," he muttered without moving his lips, a plastic smile molding his face as her mom and dad came to greet them.

"Okay, whatever." She let his weird attitude slide off her without much afterthought, figuring she'd get used to it sooner or later.

*

"So we finally meet, Mr. Marcelli. I'm Herbert." He reached out and took Vince's hand. Herbert Simmons had a handshake that could crack walnuts. Vince knew right away the guy had to have been in the military. His eyes were the same deep brown as Julie's and when he smiled his left cheek sported the same dimple, too. He was tan and his arms looked pretty muscular under his polo shirt. Julie's father looked incredibly youthful and nowhere near his true age.

"Call me Vince." He now took the hand of the woman who identified herself as Annie. Vince smiled tightly and nodded a greeting, thinking about the loud session of sex he and Julie had just shared. He was certain that plasterboard and two-by-fours couldn't muffle the noise they'd made. Heat flooded his face and he avoided eye contact, looking at Julie until he collected his senses again. Right now he'd like nothing more than to smack that little ass of hers.

He hadn't felt this embarrassed since getting caught in the basement with Connie Hernandez back in junior high. His mom had walked in and he'd had his hands under Connie's blouse. She had been known as the girl who could never say no, and he'd been proving the rumor correct until his mother went haywire and ordered the girl out of her house, telling the scared and crying thirteen-year-old to never show her face again.

Shaking off the old memory and his mortification, Vince focused on the present. Julie's folks looked surprisingly chipper for their age. Annie wore a flower print dress that was more modern than old-fashioned. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail and bangs framed her green eyes. If she dyed her hair a darker color than the natural gray it was now, she would look in her late fifties at the most. She was quite pretty, even at the age of seventy-two. Vince felt a real smile melting the artificial one he had worn a second ago. He knew Julie would be just a beautiful in forty years.

"Come into the kitchen and have some cinnamon rolls and coffee, Vince." Annie led the way, leaving no room for protest.

"Coffee?" Julie laughed and followed her mother. "You're speaking his language, Mom."

Two cups of Annie's special brew and three cinnamon rolls later, Vince deposited Julie on the front seat of the Jeep, stomped around to the other side, sliding his angry frame behind the wheel. Jamming the key into the ignition, he started the motor, shifted the beast into gear and pulled away from the curb.

"I don't know what you're so mad about. Again." Julie shot him a baffled glance, fumbling with the seatbelt as they roared along the streets. "My parents adored you."

He stayed silent for awhile as he maneuvered through the streets. When they were following the smooth flow of traffic, Vince turned his piercing gaze on her. "You could have told me that your parents lived right next door to you!"

"What difference does that make?"

"Think about it, sweetheart. Their home is connected to yours. And, I hate to tell you this, but we were both kind of loud just awhile ago. I think they heard us," his last words were muttered under his breath. "In fact, I'm pretty positive they did, although I can't understand why they'd be so nice to a complete stranger for compromising their daughter."

Julie laughed. "They're probably relieved that you're getting me out of their hair. They often accuse me of hovering," she said, sounding a little irritated. "After the situation I caught them in yesterday, it would be pretty unfair of them to comment on anything we're doing now and will be doing in the future!"

Vince discovered that his anger had melted away and he was smiling again. More than he had in weeks, even years. He laughed, a low, rumbling chuckle that chased his annoyance away. "Awfully damn sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"Pretty much." She beamed.

Vince snorted softly, wanting nothing more than to feel her mouth against his. "I think I can live with that." He thought twice about kissing her again. He was already being pulled under faster than he could catch his breath, but she looked so soft sitting there, so inviting. He knew he couldn't resist her even if he tried. And that scared the living hell out of him.

Need outweighed any fear as he pulled over to the curb and stopped the vehicle. He reached over, caressing her cheek with his thumb. She closed her eyes. Vince sighed, surrendered, and willingly drowned in the moment. He heard Julie unsnap her seatbelt. He slid his arms around her waist, pulling her closer, slanting his mouth over hers. His tongue writhed against hers. Julie's arms went around his neck, her breasts pressed tightly against his chest. When she moved around, Vince groaned into her mouth.

He slid his hands up and down her waist, his fingers digging into the soft, plump

flesh of her hips. He pulled her closer still, wishing they were both naked right about now, wishing the world would stop for just a day or two ... or three. But he knew that was impossible.

Their mouths parted and Vince ran a thumb over her wet bottom lip, taking in the desire in Julie's eyes, thinking it was quite possible that things really could be different this time around.

"I hate to break this up, but I have a stop to make before heading off to Vegas." Just that fast he had his wall firmly in place. He mentally stood on one side and he was certain to have her on the other. Though he should have felt relieved, even safe, it left him with a strange sense of loneliness he'd never noticed before.

Julie gave a nervous laugh and said, "Where are we going?"

"I have to visit my mom over at the rest home." Before she asked, he furnished the information himself. "She's got Alzheimer's. She was pretty okay for awhile, but when it got to be too much I had to have her put in a home."

He looked away and Julie said, "It bothers you that you had to put her there, doesn't it?"

"Hell yes."

She laid a soft palm over his chest. "Don't feel guilty, Vince. I know what kind of man you are. If you had to put her there, it's because it was necessary. I'm sure it's very nice and that you checked it out top to bottom."

"Yeah." His voice was deep. "That room costs a healthy chunk. She's worth it, though." Vince smiled. "Thanks."

"No problem. That's what I'm here for. Among other things." She graced him with a flirty wink.

He watched as she settled back in her seat, nervously tucking her hair behind her ears. He found the way she got all flustered around him endearing, even if she did try to act uninhibited. Once again he wondered what the hell he was getting himself into.

Turning the key in the ignition, he pulled away from the curb, knowing he couldn't stop this even if he wanted to. As the hours ticked by and he spent more time with Julie, he wasn't so sure he wanted it to stop at all.

Chapter Eight

After driving along in companionable silence for a few minutes toward Glendale and the Casa Bonita rest home, Julie let out a soft laugh.

Vince glanced at her and smiled. "Something funny?"

She blinked several times. "No, just remembering something I walked in on yesterday."

"By the look on your face, I'd say it was something amusing." His concentration was torn between the traffic ahead and the woman in the seat next to him.

"I went to visit my parents yesterday morning and they were," she took a deep breath, "having sex. Well, they weren't actually having sex, but they would have been if I'd arrived two minutes later." Disbelief was on her face, mingled with a half-smile.

"And?"

"I really didn't know they still did that sort of thing!"

Vince chuckled. "Guess you know better now."

"They're just so old!" She sighed. "I guess I'm afraid they'll break something even by doing the smallest tasks, yet alone all of the physical efforts making love includes." She swiped a palm across her forehead.

"Hey, I hope I'm lucky enough to still do the horizontal tango when I'm in my seventies." He made swivel motions with his hips.

Julie slapped him on the arm. "Oh, stop!" Her playful look of disgust made Vince laugh even more.

Julie changed the subject. "Do you visit your mother often?"

"Every week." He grew stiff, his tone even, bearing no emotion. "Tomorrow is my usual day, but since we'll be tied up for the next day or so I thought I'd drop by today." His mind drifted over scenarios of being tied up by Julie, he her willing prisoner. Vince rolled his eyes. The fantasies were already starting.

"I bet it was hard for you, caring for your mother without any help," Julie commented.

Vince was happy to reroute his mind, even if it was on the course of a sobering topic. "She was able to care for herself most of the time. I worked to help support her financially since my dad died back when I was fourteen, helped her out physically when she needed it." He studied the palm of his hand as it rested atop the steering wheel. Traffic had come to a halt. "When her mind started to go... I did what I could for as long as I could, but when the load became too much..." He went quiet for a second. "I had to have her put in the home."

"Like I said before, you did what you felt was right," Julie said softly, touching his arm.

"Yeah, I guess so." He shrugged, moving again as the cars in front of him sped up until they were doing double-nickels. It wasn't fast enough for him, but better than standing still.

He continued, "She barely recognizes me half the time. In fact, she usually doesn't. It's like she's in her own little world. She makes up all these crazy-ass stories, or sometimes talks to me as if I'm a friend from her childhood years." He didn't wonder why

he felt the need to share the information with Julie. The situation bothered him to no end, ate away at him daily. Sharing with Julie just seemed natural.

Vince knew she didn't have the answers. She wasn't a psychiatrist. She couldn't take away his pain or his mother's illness; she wasn't a faith healer. But somehow, just by talking to her, a big chunk of his confusion and anger melted like chocolate left in a car in the middle of July. He rewound that last thought and cringed inwardly. Melted chocolate? No, he never was the romantic type.

He slid a sideways glance to the woman beside him. He sure as hell wished he were, though.

* * * *

After Vince's firm protest about Julie not going into the rest home, she now walked along beside him, keeping up with his aggravated pace.

"Hey, it's only fair," she said.

"What? Why?" Vince paused to glare down at her in exasperation.

She shrugged. "I don't know, because I say so?"

"Have you ever been to one of these places?" He opened one of the glass doors, ushering her inside. A blast of cool air and the unmistakable smell of old people hit him full force. His stomach knotted. Not actually a stench or offensive in any way, it was simply the smell of the dying—and it was something he hadn't been able to get used to in the past five years.

Julie seemed unaware of the strange aroma as she nearly skipped along side of him like a kid on a fieldtrip. "No, this is my first time."

Vince looked around at the old people shuffling along in slippers talking to themselves, some sitting in wheelchairs in a stupor. He scraped his shoulder with his ear, brushing away the fingers of death that seemed to claw at him.

They walked over to the high reception desk covered in a tacky wood panel and metal so Vince could sign in. "Believe me, it's no treat."

"Hello, Mr. Marcelli. A day early, I see." The tall, slender blond addressed Vince. "Your mother is out in the garden area." She flashed perfect, white teeth at him. "I see you brought a friend with you this time." She looked Julie up and down. "Your niece?"

After jotting down his name on the guest list, Vince looked down at Julie then eye-to-eye with the blond behind the counter. They looked like cowboys in a showdown. Maybe it had something to do with the blonde's comment about Julie being his niece. Aside from the fact that she looked pretty young for her age, her lack of height could have people thinking she was a kid. Vince knew better. Heat started to pool in his balls as he remembered their lovemaking of just hours ago. Julie was definitely no kid. She also wasn't his niece. So what was she?

Julie was clearly waiting to be introduced, and the blond with the silicone knockers seemed to be waiting too. For what, he couldn't guess.

Here goes nothing. "Uh ... Gretchen." He read the receptionist's nametag that was pinned to her chest right near the open zipper of her uniform. He couldn't help but notice her breasts since they were on display for the entire world to see. She probably caused ten coronaries a day dressed like that. They were too artificial-looking though, too tight and untouchable. He liked the real thing. "This is Julie." He wrapped his arm around Julie's waist and pulled her close to him, planting a kiss right on her lips.

Julie flushed, giving him an adoring smile. The blond sniffed and zipped her dress up. Vince breathed a sigh of relief. He had made the right woman happy.

Grabbing Julie's hand, Vince walked with her toward the glass doors that led to the garden out back, grateful to be out of the oppressive atmosphere of both Nurse Gretchen's strange behavior and the reeking smell that turned his stomach.

"Was that just a trick to get Blondie off your trail?"

Vince stopped again, just on the other side of the doors. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, come on, Vince. You didn't see the way she was foaming at the mouth for that gorgeous body of yours?" She looked at him with surprise on her face. "No, you really didn't notice."

"It wasn't a trick. I was introducing you to her since she seemed so eager to know who you were. I wasn't sure of what to say. You sure as hell aren't my niece."

"Thank goodness!" She grinned up at him, making their way over the cement walkway that sliced through the middle of thick, green grass. The surroundings in the garden were quite welcoming compared to the off-white tile and pale pink walls of the inside, though the rooms were another story. They were comfortable and cozy, with only one other person as a roomie. Instead of looking like a hospital, they looked more like a dorm. Vince had been glad of the fact, although he knew the less healthy occupants were in the west side of the home. He hoped his mother never had to be transferred there.

Vince shoved the sobering thought away as he spied his mother. As they started walking in her direction, a frail man who looked about a thousand years old set down the book he was reading and reached up from the bench he sat on to grab Julie's hand. Vince wanted to drag her away from him, but she merely stopped and smiled.

"Hello." Julie took his thin hand in both of hers. The man said nothing, but looked up at her intently. Julie's smile faded and looked back just as deeply.

Vince took a couple steps back. It gave him the creeps to stand that close to crazy people. The old man wore a suit and tie, and shiny leather loafers. He thought it looked weird for this place since most of the folks here were wearing bathrobes and pajamas and tranquilized smiles, but figured the old guy was used to dressing up when he lived outside these walls. With a small sigh, he waited for her.

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Julie held the man's left hand in hers. She saw a question there in his eyes—a lingering memory. She pressed her fingers against his wedding ring and a scene from his past seeped into her mind. Her eyes closed of their own volition and a shooting pain stabbed her heart. Her throat swelled with sadness. She saw him, much younger, arguing with a woman who had auburn hair and pale blue eyes. They stood in a kitchen, fifties-style furnishings all around. The man stood on one side of the dinette table and the woman on the other. And Julie was there, her psyche sliding inside of his.

"Why'd you do it, Beth? Tom's my best friend!" A sob stuck in his throat. His hands shook as he fought to hold on to his emotions. Their handwritten vows and passionate scenes from their honeymoon seemed like a like to him now. "I told you, I didn't. Why don't you believe me?" Beth pleaded. She walked around the table to get closer, her arms outstretched, but he moved, keeping the barrier between them.

"I saw you!"

"You didn't see anything, Dan! Tom made passes at *me*. I swear to you. I love you!" She collapsed in a dining room chair, covered her face with her hands and cried. "I didn't

do anything."

Dan took off his wedding ring and threw it across the room. He watched as it hit a cupboard and bounced off, falling into the sink. He hoped the damned thing slid down and into the sewer. "Tramp." And he walked out.

Julie's mind reached out for a second and grasped the other woman's thoughts. For that breath in time past Julie was Beth. She thought her thoughts and felt her feelings. A surprised gasp jumped out of her lungs. As if breaching a universal law, the vision snapped off and she stood in the present again.

Tears filled her eyes as she looked down at the old man's thin gray hair that was parted on the side and slicked down. She didn't want to look into his eyes again, but bent a little to get closer to Dan who sat silent, waiting. "She didn't do it," Julie whispered.

There was silence before he murmured, "I know." The older man patted her hand as if trying to comfort her. "I know."

Julie smiled, giving his hand a squeeze, standing straight again.

"It was okay. We talked." He glanced at his wedding ring. "Things were fine." The look in his eyes told Julie that there wasn't a hint of remorse in this man's life. He had made good on promises, had healed all wounds.

Julie glanced at Vince who looked right back at her. She fully intended to do the same where the two of them were concerned. No regrets. All promises fulfilled.

Diverting her mind from an uncertain future and back to the older man in front of her, she let his hand go, offering him a tremulous smile as her eyes filled with emotion. Dan merely nodded then went back to his book.

Julie walked over and took Vince's hand, needing the support. She looked up at him with a rueful smile. "Sorry about that."

"No problem. You made the guy happy." He shook his head and gave a short laugh. "For the life of me I'll never understand this."

"Maybe not." They made forward progress toward the garden again. The sun filtered through the huge maples, covering them with polka dot shadows. "But you'll get used to it in time."

"Awfully sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"Maybe so." She laughed when he stabbed her with an exasperated look.

Vince grew very stiff and very silent as they walked over to the last bench in a line of three and a tall, slim woman with her black hair pulled back into a long, long braid. She sat beside a circular garden bordered with red brick and bursting with a riot of Petunias and Marigolds. The woman knitted what appeared to Julie as the world's longest scarf. Vince's grip on her hand tightened painfully. *He's nervous*, Julie thought with a pang of emotion. *More than likely embarrassed about his mother's mental problem.*

The woman looked up from her craft and smiled. "Ah, Vincenzo." She held her shaky hands out for an embrace. Vince complied; releasing Julie's hand to take the fragile-looking woman into his arms for a brief hug.

"How are you today, Ma?" Vince looked relieved that his mother was having a lucid day.

"Buono, though your father kept me awake all night with that snoring of his." She frowned, pursing her lips. "I feel like a train is running through the bedroom most of the time." She shooed away invisible insects.

Vince's eyes looked sad. He glanced at Julie as she moved toward the older woman,

taking her hand. "Mrs. Marcelli, I'm so pleased to meet you." Julie flashed a smile that was guaranteed to win over even the toughest cynic.

"Who is this?" The woman took her hand back, looking at Vince with narrowed eyes.

"This is Julie Simmons, Ma. She's my—"

"I'm a friend of Vince's," Julie offered. "We're working on a case together."

"What is this woman talking about? Case? What case?" She shook a thin finger at Vince. "Is she one of those little cheerleaders that are always after you? I told you not to play around with pompom girls. They're nothing but trouble."

Vince turned scarlet from the neck up. So Vince had had a string of admirers as a teenager? Not surprising. "No, Mrs. Marcelli. I'm not a cheerleader; those girls won't go far in life. Just think of the things they would do to poor Vincent." She patted him on the back.

"Yes, it's true." The older woman nodded wisely. "Come. Sit. Noi parliamo. We talk." Mrs. Marcelli moved her blue variegated yarn and needles to the other side of her lap, motioning Julie to sit. "I like her very much, son."

Vince only shook his head and sat beside Julie. He leaned close to her ear and said, "Women can communicate in any language and on any level of mentality."

Julie elbowed him in the ribs.

Vince yelped and rubbed the sore spot.

"Now tell me, Julie. What plans do you have for your future after high school? My Vincenzo, he's a quiet boy. Always interested in what is going on around him. He sits everyday on the stoop and watches people as they go by." Her eyes were a deep blue, though sadly looked far away.

"I'm majoring in psychology." Julie thought this was great fun sitting and talking with her about Vince's childhood. His mother's memory would drift in and out through the years. At times she thought Vince was merely a baby, with Julie in the role of the next door neighbor. At times he was a child in elementary school and Julie found herself addressed as one of his classmates. And all the while Vince fidgeted beside her, shifting this way and that, sighing and grimacing. He was clearly uncomfortable.

A half hour later, he declared it was time to leave.

"It was nice meeting you, Mrs. Marcelli." Julie was rewarded with a hug from his mother.

"You take good care of this woman, capire? She'll make a good wife someday. She has a good soul."

"Si, Ma." Vince looked down at his mother. "I'll be back next week."

"Ciao!" she called after them as they walked away and got back in his Jeep.

"You're a good son, Vince," Julie said. "I don't know what I would do without my folks, and here you've been the man in your small family since you were fourteen. You've taken a lot on your shoulders. You don't have to feel guilty about your decision to put her here. She's better off there than having you trying to live your life and taking care of her, too."

Julie realized what she had just said. Here she was commending Vince for doing the right thing so he could have a life of his own, yet she was the one hovering over her perfectly healthy parents all the time? In that moment Julie finally understood that she could let go of her parents and carry on with her own life. In fact, she should have done it long ago, like after her eighteenth birthday.

When he didn't answer her, Julie picked up the conversation again as Vince turned on the motor and they drove away. "Thank you for taking me to see your mother."

"Truthfully, things went better than I thought they would. I didn't know how you would handle the way her mind drifts. How did you talk to her so comfortably like that? Aside from the fact that she spoke Italian half the time, she talked about people who you don't know as if you were all bosom buddies." He snorted in irony. "Hell, I don't know half the people she talks about. Most are childhood friends of hers from when she and Pop lived in Sicily fifty years ago. Others," he gave a slow shake of his head, "she invents."

"Your mother's charming."

"Well, I'm glad you think so. I have to admit I was impressed with the way you handled the whole situation." His smile was one of affection.

"Thanks, but I'm used to being around people who are ... unique," she said for lack of a better word.

"I wouldn't consider my mother's trips in and out of lucidity unique. She's just not all there." He tapped his temple with a forefinger. "Being around what unique people? I thought you said that was the first time you'd been to one of those places."

"It was. After that triple homicide I worked on, I spent a month in a mental institution," she said matter-of-factly. Now she could talk about it without becoming emotional over the subject. She had long ago put that demon to rest and refused to resurrect it.

Vince's head turned in shock. "I had no idea it had been that bad. I'm sorry." He reached over, running the back of his hand over her cheek.

"It's over," she said softly. "I got to meet some interesting people. Some were a sandwich shy of a picnic," she laughed, "but there were a few who were labeled as schizophrenic or having multiple personalities, yet turned out to be psychics in reality."

"Yeah?" He sounded intrigued.

Julie nodded. "For years they had been plagued with seeing things, hearing voices and or people talking inside their heads. Many committed themselves because of all the commotion going on in their minds. Come to find out, they were picking up on the thoughts of people around them."

"Wow."

"Well, it was only a tiny percentage of them..." She looked at the clock on the dashboard. "I'm glad I can't read minds," Julie continued. "Always knowing what people are thinking, never having a moment's rest."

Vince lifted his brows. "Yeah, that would bite. I barely get a rest from my own mind."

"Same here!" She held up an invisible glass in mock salute. "You know what?"

"What?"

"Ever since I've been with you I haven't picked up a single vibe unless I was actually trying. No pictures popping into my head. Nothing. It's so ... peaceful in my mind." She laughed, feeling strangely free. "I wonder why?"

Vince slid a look at her, then back on the road as he maneuvered through the streets and finally onto the I-15 freeway in the direction of the Mojave Desert, their ultimate destination, Las Vegas, Nevada. "Probably because your mind's been derailed for the past few days."

"Probably because of you," she stated, smiling with satisfaction when he blushed red-hot.

Chapter Nine

"I've got it all planned," Vince said. They were halfway there. "We'll locate the child, abduct him, use a rental car for the pickup vehicle and have this one waiting close by so by the time the nanny spots vehicle number one, we'll already be on our way in this one. We'll take the boy to PD, and notify his parents, letting them know he's safe. How does that sound?" He grinned, thinking it an ingenious plan.

"Why don't we just find out for sure if Tommy is there, call the police, and they can take it from there?" Julie supplied her own version of how she thought it should go down.

Vince was disappointed. "Well, I guess that would work, too."

"Would be a whole lot less complicated."

"Yeah," he agreed, thinking there were two levels of involvement: locating and notifying, or locating and abducting. Where he would have opted for the latter, with Julie by his side he chose to follow her advice. No need to get her involved with a potentially dangerous situation. They would locate the woman and child, notify the police then sit on the backburner while the cops took over. Not his usual style. Vince sighed inwardly.

"Look at it this way, Vince. With me along, you'll be able to solve this case a lot more quickly."

He grunted in agreement, but let the ire slide right out of him. "Thanks for helping with this case." He reached over to squeeze her hand. "Will it be as bad as last night when you read the items again to get an approximate location?"

She closed her eyes, and gave a slight shake of her head. "The worst is over. From now on it's mostly recollection, not actually having to relive the incident. Not only that, but the red sneakers are the one's I'll be reading and those were mild. The others didn't hold any information as to where she was."

"Good." He rolled his shoulders and grimaced. "Why don't we get a bite to eat? My stomach's empty, my ass is asleep, and I have a hundred kinks I need to work out."

"How can I deprive a man of such comforts?"

Driving off the main highway, he took the exit to Victorville, stopping at the first restaurant he spotted. "This fine with you?"

"Looks great."

After Vince parked the beast, he climbed out with ease, coming around to lift Julie out and to the ground. "You really need to get a ladder for this thing," she complained. "Or smaller tires."

"Who needs a ladder when you've got me?" His hands still rested on her waist, slid down to her hips, and pulled her against his pelvis.

"True," Julie said on a gusty sigh. In the next instant, Vince covered her mouth with his in a sinfully long kiss that had them both gasping for air.

"Woman, what you do to me," He looked deeply into her eyes, as if trying to decipher the hieroglyphics of her soul.

"Darling," she sweetly replied, tracing the outline of his lips with a gentle finger, "I haven't even begun."

"Lord, have mercy." He feigned apprehension, casting his worried gaze skyward. Sliding an arm around her waist, he directed her to the doors of the restaurant.

* * * *

Lunch had been over hours ago. Vince and Julie were becoming restless. The scenery along the way—Joshua trees, yuccas, sagebrush—was interesting for the first few hours. Now it all went by in one long, brown and green blur.

Radio stations faded in and out as they passed through the various towns and mile upon mile of nothingness. They drove on until twilight came creeping up on them, bringing with it a chill wind that erased any of the afternoon's heat.

Driving east through lava beds and countless dry lakes and over the Nevada state line, they finally saw the town rise out of the desert, its joyously wicked signs flirting with the fading daylight. This was Sodom and Gomorrah of the twenty-first century—Las Vegas.

"Well, where to now?" Vince asked expectantly, pulling over to the side of the empty road.

Julie wished they were on a pleasure trip. She could just imagine Vince stark naked, stretched out on some tacky red velvet bed in one of the hotels along The Strip. But, they were here to accomplish a mission and the sooner the better, for them all.

"Can we get out and stretch just for a minute?" She scrunched up her face. "Ninety-nine percent of my body is numb and paralyzed."

Vince tried stretching, but his arms and legs were cramped in the small confines of the vehicle. "Yeah, I know what you mean." He chuckled lightly. "Let's take a breather."

"Sounds good." She opened her door and Vince was there to help her down.

They walked around on the dirt and sand covered roadside for a few minutes, the cool evening breeze quickly chilling her skin. Walking back over to the Jeep, Julie reached in back, grabbing a sweater from her case. Macho Vince denied being cold, but suggested they get back in the Jeep and continue on their way.

"Do you have any idea of which way we should go?" Vince asked from his previous seat beside Julie, turning the key in the ignition to start the engine.

"I'll tell you in a minute." Retrieving the dusty, red sneakers from behind her seat, Julie took them in her hands once again. Closing her eyes, she looked around in her mind for anything that might give clues as to what direction they should head in.

"I'm picking something up," she said, not surprised that the closer they got to the proverbial scene of the crime, the more information filtered through her mind and with greater clarity. "Go down this road."

Shifting into gear, Vince followed Julie's guidance, waiting for further instructions.

"Turn over here." She pointed the direction. "Keep going until we find Twain Avenue."

It was past dark and she was beat from the long day and the long drive, yet excitement pumped through her at the prospect of finding Tommy and his captor so quickly.

"Why didn't you know this before?" Vince asked, driving in the directions stated.

"My antenna theory," she reminded.

"Oh, yeah. I'll get it all straight sooner or later."

Julie's soul fluttered at his remark, but before she had a chance to comment, her heart started pounding in her chest. "We're almost there. Two blocks straight ahead," she said in an excited tone.

"It should be around here somewhere," she assured him as they slowly drove along

the street, Vince looking to one side and Julie to the other.

Being dark, it made things more difficult to see, but sure enough, right at the end of the block, there was the trailer park of Julie's mind, looking just as she said it would, a green and white trailer on one side of the entrance, and a Silver Streak to the other.

"Well, I'll be damned," Vince whispered.

"You were having doubts?" She played offense.

"Not a one." That grin of his threatened to melt Julie's bones.

Parking at the curb, they noticed the Silver Streak was dark. Evidently the woman wasn't home.

"You stay here," Vince ordered, opening his door and unfolding his limbs to the asphalt.

"I will not!" Julie countered, exiting her side of the vehicle. "If we go in looking like a normal, everyday couple, we may get more information than if you show your hulking figure to an old lady. You may give the woman a heart attack."

"Come on," he grumbled, taking her hand. "I hate the fact that you're right—again."

"Really?" She looked innocently up at him. "I thought you'd be getting used to it by now."

"Oh, you are so not funny," he jeered as they walked into the park, their feet crunching on the gravel driveway. Several dogs barked, but not a curtain stirred in the windows of the silver trailer. A knock on the door of the bullet-shaped dwelling confirmed the fact that the woman was not in. "She'll be back. She has no idea we're on her trail." He looked around and said, "Let's try the manager's place."

"Sure." When they reached the trailer designated, Vince knocked on the flimsy screen door. "Let me do the talking, okay?" Julie looked up at him and added a sweetly drawled, "Please? I'm really not trying to take over, if that's what you—that is what you think, isn't it? I can see it on your face." She reached up and put a palm on his shoulder. "I just want to help you, and I have a feeling this woman will be more receptive to someone looking non-threatening as me."

Before he had a chance to answer, the porch light sprung to life and an old woman in a polyester housedress with geometric patterns sprinkled over it cautiously peeked out from the door that she opened a few inches. "Sorry, no vacancies," she said in a voice that sounded like she lived on a regular diet of cigarettes and hard liquor. Smelled like it too. She started closing the door. Julie moved around Vince's ample form so that she was in full view. "We're sorry to disturb you, but we're looking for a friend. Maybe you could tell us which trailer is hers?"

"What's your friend's name?" The haggard woman looked suspiciously at her, giving a scratch of dull hair that had been permed way too many times.

"Cynthia Marlow," Julie used her most friendly tone.

"Don't recognize the name."

Julie gave a description of what she knew Cynthia to look like.

The older woman tipped her head back, as if debating whether or not to talk. An orange and black spotted cat appeared, rubbing against the woman's legs and meowed. At last she said, "Yeah, I know who she is. Name's Cynthia Monroe, not Marlow."

Swallowing hard, Julie laughed as if embarrassed by the mistake. "Of course." Her eyes darted around the park. "Is she home? It's been ages and we'd love to see her."

"Lives in the one right there." She bobbed her head in the said direction; the Silver

Streak. "Won't be back until tomorrow."

Julie and Vince hid their disappointment. "About what time, do you know?"

"How should I know?" The woman seemed clearly irritated. "I'm the manager, not her mother."

"Of course you aren't, I'm just eager to see them again." Julie felt her smile was pasted on by this time, but kept her cool tone while Vince stayed in the shadows.

"How's the boy? It's been so long since we've seen them. Years, hasn't it, darling?"

"Years," Vince supplied.

"Boy's just fine. I saw the little hellion this morning pulling my cat's tail."

"I'm glad to hear they're doing well. Maybe we'll stop by tomorrow on our way back home. It'll be nice to see them again. Do me a favor, will you?" Julie added as an afterthought. "Could you keep our arrival a secret, please? We'd like to surprise them."

She stood there for an indecisive moment until Julie produced a twenty from her pocket, holding it out in offering. "Thank you for your help."

The old woman poked two fingers through a hole in the screen and quickly took the bill. "Sure, no problem." She shrugged, gave a hacking cough, and closed the door.

Vince and Julie started walking back to the car. "Try coming back early evening," a voice like rock sliding across a cheese grater called after them.

Julie turned and waved her thanks. "We'll do that!"

"Pretty smooth, Simmons. How the hell do you play it so cool?" Vince asked as he had the Jeep in motion once again. "If it had been me, I would have flashed my badge, then prodded and poked the old geezer until I got what I wanted."

"Yeah, and she probably would have closed the door in your face," Julie informed.

Vince laughed. "Those times are too numerous to mention. Maybe I can pick up a few pointers."

Julie smiled, satisfied. "You know the old saying about catching more flies with honey than vinegar."

"I hate to burst your bubble, sweetheart, but flies aren't attracted to honey or vinegar. They're more at home in a dirty garbage can or a nice pile of sh—"

"Vince!" she stopped the rest of his statement. "It's just a saying! Besides, if I know you, you would have stormed your way in there and gotten the woman all riled up."

"You're right, as always." He changed the subject. "Want to get a couple of rooms at a hotel over on The Strip and check out the local sights for a few hours?"

Julie gave a half smile, "Why don't we grab a few supplies from a grocery store, find a nice motel off The Strip and check out some sights inside our one room?"

"I was hoping you'd say that." He pinned her with a hungry look. "I haven't nearly had enough of you."

Julie felt her face grow hot and she ducked her head. Vince laughed at the display. "Why, I think you're blushing, Miss Simmons."

"Oh, stuff it." She sniffed, a wide smile on her face as she looked out her side window at the bright lights around them. Had she ever felt this alive? This happy? She wanted desperately to hold on to these moments, wondering what Vince's intentions were once the case was over. Would he want to carry on their affair? Would it remain just that? An affair? Would he want to deepen things between them in time? She glanced over at his profile illuminated by the lights on the dashboard. The sight of him never ceased to take her breath away. But would he soon want to end things?

Sometimes she wished she could read the future. Especially her own. Then again, sometimes it was better not knowing.

Chapter Ten

After paying the attendant rent for the night, they unloaded their suitcases and the few bags containing necessary supplies for tonight, as well as a few unnecessary supplies Vince had picked up behind Julie's back.

Walking in, he switched on a light, noting the room was small, but neat and clean, containing a color TV, queen bed, and kitchenette. It smelled of new carpet and paint.

Vince set his case at the foot of the bed. Going to the small kitchen, he unloaded the plastic bag he carried, sticking a few things in the fridge and freezer, making sure Julie wasn't looking.

Julie walked over to the bed and put her suitcase right next to his. "This is nice," she remarked, gravitating over to the Formica counter and setting her bag of groceries on it.

"Better than some of the sleazy places I've stayed in during undercover ops." He shuddered, remembering some of those rat-infested dives. This place was a palace in comparison. "Why don't you go take a shower while I fix dinner? I'm sure you'd like to wash some of the travel off." He opened a pack of paper plates.

"Are you sure? I feel funny always having you cook when I'm perfectly capable." Julie stood behind him. He turned around and saw her biting on her bottom lip.

A dark brow shot up in accusation. "Now who's living in the Middle Ages?" He pointed at her with a plastic spoon he had retrieved from the small red and white box he'd picked up at the store. "Besides, you can't consider this cooking." An upturned hand swept over the assortment of bags and containers sitting on the counter.

"Okay." She held up her hands in surrender. "Far be it from me to hold a man back when he's attempting to come out of the dark and join the ERA."

"Ha-ha." Vince gave her a look of disdain and shooed her out of the room. "When you return, fair lady, I shall have an epicurean delight waiting."

Julie curtsied. "I'm looking forward to it, kind sir." She grabbed a small bag from her case, got into his and took his toiletries out, then walked to the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

Vince found himself smiling once again and started humming an old Queen song, *Killer Queen*. He frowned. Hard.

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"Dinner was delicious." Julie wiped her mouth on the flower print paper napkin.

"Thanks for the compliment." They worked together at cleaning up and tossing away paper plates, napkins, plastic forks and cups. "I was always a pro at throwing together the perfect roast beef sandwich." The statement was followed by an arrogant smile.

"And the way you opened the bag of chips and carton of coleslaw." Julie held a hand over her heart, pretending to swoon. "I must say you gave me a case of the vapors."

They laughed together, and when nothing was left to clean up or toss in the trash, Julie went to brush her teeth. When she came out, Vince stood in the middle of the room staring at the bed.

"Why don't you go take a shower and I'll unpack?" She touched his arm, bringing him out of his inner thoughts.

"Uh, sure." He rubbed his eyes, feeling as if he just woke up. "Although, I don't see

much point since we'll most likely be out of here by tomorrow."

"Oh, let me have fun playing house, will you? See you in a few minutes," Julie sang out as she set Vince's suitcase on the bed and unclasped the lock at either side.

"See ya." He started in the direction of the bathroom, feeling slightly disquieted by the fact that she wanted to play house and felt compelled to go through his things. She was getting close, personal and comfortable. Again.

He entered the tiny, sterile-looking white room, urging the feeling to pass. They were being thrown together under unusual circumstances. So what if she was working her way into his life more quickly than if they had been pursuing this relationship from a normal standpoint? It was common for people who were flung into a situation such as theirs to become intimate and close pretty fast. Wasn't it?

Items on the sink caught his eye. He saw that Julie had already retrieved the bathroom supplies from his case and had lined them up beside hers. A pink razor, a black razor. A purple toothbrush, a green toothbrush. Herbal shampoo, VO5. All side-by-side, looking very cozy and normal. Vince suddenly felt nauseated and his mouth got watery.

Catching the bad guys was always easy for him. He loved the thrill of the chase, enjoyed examining every bit of evidence, no matter how small, just to put the pieces of the puzzle together. But he didn't have to chase Julie. She willingly surrendered to him, sweetly and completely. There was no puzzle where her feelings for him were concerned. There was no mystery; she was the proverbial open book. She wanted him. And, God help him, he wanted her.

If they had a kid together he'd be nearly sixty before the child even went to college.

He leaned against the door, eyes closed, mind stripped as bare as his body was now. What the hell was he thinking? Marriage? Kids? His eyes popped open and he sucked in air, feeling strangely lightheaded.

He walked to the tub and turned on the water, adjusting it until it was as hot as he could stand. Flipping the lever, he stepped in under the spray, letting the water absorb his asinine thoughts and take them down the drain where he wouldn't think about them anymore.

Ten minutes later, he stepped out and dried himself off. He caught sight of his reflection in the mirror and refused to interpret what the hell *that* look on his face meant. He pretended the guy in the mirror was a stranger passing by and turned his attention to sliding into conservative boxers and prehistoric jeans, then turned off the light. He couldn't look at the guy with the goofy-ass look on his face one more second.

"Hi there." Julie was already in bed, propped up against the wood grained headboard. The pastel-print spread lay across her lap. Peach lace covered her breasts from his view. Yeah, he really detested lingerie.

"Hi." He stayed planted in the doorway, finding comfort in the fact that the lamp was off in the room. It hid his emotions.

"Come here, Marcelli."

Like a victim of hypnosis, Vince walked the short distance to the bed. He stared down at the woman who waited for him to join her. Street lights and neon signs spilled through the half-closed vertical blinds, painting the room with stripes. In some part of his mind he thought they looked a lot like prison bars. Another part of his mind didn't care.

"Nervous?"

"A little," he admitted.

"Same here. This is new to me, too." She reached out to take his hand, pulling him down on the bed, the mattress springs groaning under his weight.

When she said that, Vince tilted his head, feeling he saw into her very soul at this moment. What he saw stunned him. She wasn't as assured as she made herself out to be. She was just as confused, just as uncertain as he was about this whole thing, yet they were both unable, unwilling, to stop it. Somehow the knowledge gave him courage.

His sigh of surrender came out in one big whoosh. "You know, I want you so damn bad I ache."

"Take me." She lay back on the bed; the invitation in her eyes more than Vince could stand.

Feeling like a randy sixteen instead of divorced and middle-aged, he reached out to untie each of the three satin ribbons holding her lacy little number in place—two at her shoulders and one between her thighs. It was the most feminine article of sleepwear he had ever seen. Although he vowed she wouldn't be wearing it much longer, yet alone sleeping in it.

After the little bit of nothing was peeled from her body, Julie raised her arms above her head, giving Vince full access. "I love it when you touch me."

"I love touching you." Vince ran his hands over her skin. Skin that felt as soft as his fifteen-year-old suede jacket. Inwardly he cringed. What woman wanted her skin to be compared to cowhide, even if it was the truth? His old suede jacket was very, very soft, just like Julie, though his jacket never gave him a turn-on. Julie did. Still, he was glad he hadn't voiced his observation out loud.

"Let me turn the lamp on. I want to see everything I'm doing." Vince reached over to switch on the light, soft radiance caressing Julie's body in a way he intended to duplicate. "You're so beautiful," he breathed.

Her eyelids shyly fluttered shut for a second and her cheeks turned the prettiest shade of pink, Vince noted, taking pride in the way she reacted to him.

His hungry mouth came down on her, tenderly exploring before devouring her lips, suckling her nipples, blazing wet trails over her neck, breasts, stomach. She opened her legs for him. With eager, seeking fingers he slid one inside her. "You're ready for me," he whispered against her stomach, sticking his tongue in her belly button.

She said his name over and over. It was the sexiest mantra he'd ever heard. With his free hand he pulled at the buttons of his jeans. If he didn't get out of them fast, he was sure his dick would break in two. He stood up and shoved them, along with his boxers, down his legs and kicked them off. Vince then stopped, very still.

"Julie?"

"Hmmm?"

"I want to be inside you, but I've got to taste you, baby." His body caught fire at his directness. Somehow, Julie had a way of removing his inhibitions one by one.

"Please do," was her breathless reply.

Vince let out a low growl, moving down between her thighs, taking sight of her in the warm light. He rubbed his face over the soft curls, inhaling her unique scent that had him throbbing harder. He planted little kisses over her inner thighs and lips. She was pretty and pink and oh, so inviting.

With his next shaky breath, lust hit him like an A-bomb and he was wild. He pushed his arms under and around her thighs, pulling her close, burying his face in her warm, wet

folds. She whimpered and he shoved his tongue inside, wanting more and more.

"You taste like heaven." His words were muffled.

Julie reached down and pushed his face closer, her hips rising to meet every thrust, every flick of his tongue. "Mmm... Vince, you're licking me so good," she purred, spurring him on.

He stuck two fingers in her while he drew circles over her clit with his tongue. He was sure to pay attention to her moans and body language, trying to discover what exactly got her hottest. She inhaled a huge breath as he sucked on her, her body tensed, and he knew she was getting close.

His chin, mouth and nose were covered with her juices. And he loved it. Goddamn, did he love it! Couldn't get enough of her. He held on while she squirmed and writhed and called his name and pulled his hair and pushed his face so close to her that he couldn't breathe, but he didn't give a flying fuck, he was having too much fun.

"Vince!" She screamed one last time. He felt her body contract and release in waves. His fingers were gripped tightly inside her. He took them out and replaced them with his lips and tongue, needing to savor her wetness. He licked her up and down one final time and she shuddered violently before melting into the mattress.

While Julie lay there, lust-drowsy and satisfied, Vince climbed on top of her, pressing her down into the cotton and springs, his erection probing, seeking entry, before every inch slid silkily inside. He moaned deeply, thinking nothing had ever felt this perfect.

Julie opened her eyes wide and gasped. "Oh! It feels so good." His gaze bored into hers with each deep stroke. "I'm yours, Vince," she whispered. "For—"

Vince sealed his mouth over hers, preventing any more words from being spoken. With hormones high and desire demanding, now wasn't the time for promises.

Her breathing was labored, but Vince reveled in the feeling of her being buried underneath him. Their tongues darted and wrestled. She dug her fingers into his back as he pressed his face into her neck. Faster, harder he drove into her.

A rough cry stuck in his throat. His entire body tensed and he shoved himself in as far as he could, spilling every ounce deep inside her. Fleetinglly he thought how relieved he was that she was on birth control. If not, he bet he'd just implanted triplets.

"Wow," Vince said after he realized he was still alive and could breathe once again. "That was..." He rolled onto his back, searching his mind for words to describe what they had just shared.

"Wonderful?" Julie offered.

"Yeah."

"Fantastic?"

"Yeah."

"The best ever?"

"Oh yeah," he groaned, sliding an arm around her waist, pulling her close against his damp chest, nuzzling his hair-stubbed chin through her hair.

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Content for the moment, they laid there dozing. Sometime later Julie's stomach growled. "Oh my!" She opened her eyes and reached down, putting a hand over the noisy area. "That wasn't very ladylike."

Vince chuckled. "Well, it's no wonder. Dinner was only a sandwich and I do believe

we've burned off those calories and then some." He yawned, scratched his head and got out of bed. "Stay right there."

Julie propped herself up on one elbow, watching in appreciation as Vince made his bare-skinned way to the small kitchen. He looked masculine and proud in all his naked glory. She sighed, feeling content. Euphoria went straight to her head, intoxicating her like the cheapest of whisky as her gaze caressed him. He was becoming more at ease with her, with himself, and their newfound intimacy. Julie's heart raced at the knowledge.

"Close your eyes," he instructed. "I have a surprise for you."

"I thought I just had my surprise," she teased, granted his request, and shut her eyes.

"That wasn't a surprise, babe. You thoroughly expected and deserved it," he taunted.

Julie beamed at his statement. "What are you up to?" She heard him rustling around in the kitchen.

"Keep 'em closed." He came and sat beside her.

"Open wide." He pressed the plastic spoon against her lips.

Julie opened her mouth and was rewarded with a spoonful of strawberry ice cream.

"Oh ... yes..." she groaned, letting the cool confection slide down her throat. She opened her eyes, meeting Vince's intense gaze.

"How is it?" His voice slid out as smooth as the next spoonful of ice cream he offered.

Julie pushed her hair out of her face. "You remembered." She was touched that he had recalled one of her weaknesses.

Vince only nodded, taking alternate spoons of the dessert. "Contributing to a woman's downfall has always been a secret ambition of mine." He graced her with a predatory smile and pushed her back down onto the pillow. "I'm dying to try this new dessert recipe I read in a magazine over at your place."

"Oh yeah?" Her voice came out in a squeak of anticipation. "How's it made?"

"Well, you take one Julie, sweet and ripe and juicy, and you add dollops of ice cream here..." He scooped some ice cream onto his finger and smeared it on one nipple, causing it to become hard and Julie to giggle. "And you lick it off." Vince did so, rousing her libido again. "You put some here..." He slathered some on the other breast. "And lick it off." He took his time with this one.

Looking up, he wagged his eyebrows at her. "Last but not least..." He looked down between her thighs then back up to her face. "You put some here!"

Julie squealed as he put cold ice cream all over her clit, her entire mound, and her thighs. Vince didn't recite the next sentence as he licked and tongued her until every bit of the confection was cleaned off and she clutched at his hair, calling his name once again as she reached orgasm.

When her breathing was more even, Vince shot her a look of invitation. "Wanna try?" He looked down to show her how stiff and ready he was.

Feeling giddy, Julie took the tub from him as he lay back on the bed. She had a wicked spark in her eyes and an evil smile on her lips. "What's on that mind of yours?" Vince questioned with a small frown that turned to panic as she plunged her hand into the ice cream, grabbing a huge handful. "Oh no!" His eyes opened wide. "Julie! No! That's too much!" He cried out in delight and agony as she rubbed it all over his shaft.

After setting the carton on the floor, her mouth was on him, licking and sucking him clean. Soon their play was forgotten as Vince urged her on faster, her mouth obliging, her

tongue swirling all the way to the bottom of his dick and right back up. One of her hands cupped and squeezed his balls. Her breasts brush lightly against his thighs as she straddled him. He reached down and pushed her head closer. She gagged a little and tears came to her eyes, but she took him all in, and he came in her mouth, Julie swallowing every drop.

Chapter Eleven

The following evening found them back at the trailer park. The gray and overcast sky offered welcome relief from the heat of the previous day, but made it look much later than the five p.m. it actually was. Vince and Julie had spent their day seeing some of the sights, passing the time until they could return and pay a visit to Cynthia. Julie lost twenty dollars worth of change to slots and Vince won forty playing blackjack, but lost it all to her when they played a few games of strip poker in their room. Although, Julie was suspicious he'd let her win just so he could get naked as quickly as possible. The thought made her smile.

As they made their way to their destination, they received only a few curious stares from the residents. Thirty paces over crunching gravel and they were on the Astroturf covered steps of the Silver Streak. Not a sign of life emanated.

"This doesn't look good," Julie commented as Vince knocked on the screen door that was torn and hanging from only one of its hinges.

He knocked again, but received no answer. "Damn! She's not here." Vince turned to Julie who shrugged and offered him a look of what-do-we-do-now? "Let's try the manager again. Maybe she's seen her."

"Okay." Her spirits were as low as Vince's. They had hoped to have this all settled by now. Hoped to find Tommy, call the authorities, and have him reunited with his parents. Now, their plans were delayed for who knew how long.

"I hope the old lady didn't tell her anything. What if she snitched, told Marlow, Monroe, whatever, that we'd been around and she took off? Damn!" He punched the side of the trailer in frustration, causing ten different dogs to go on a barking frenzy.

"Now calm down," Julie soothed, patting him on the back. "There's only one way to find out now, isn't there? Let's go talk to her."

"Maybe you'd better talk to the old bag. She didn't like me," he grumbled.

"Well, with that attitude, it's no wonder!"

"Hey," he jabbed his thumb against his chest, "I didn't get to be a topnotch detective by being all sunshine and smiles."

"Maybe, but you'd sure get a lot further if you'd quite being such a bear." She punched him playfully in the stomach. "You have a good heart and soul, why don't you show it more?"

Vince shrugged. "A detective's life doesn't allow for much spiritual growth," he said the words with all of the superiority of Confucius.

Julie arched a brow at his poetic statement. "When we get back to the motel, I'd love to jump-start that dormant spirit of yours."

She saw Vince open his mouth, ready to comment on her sultry invitation, but they now stood in front of the green and white trailer, the manager already greeting them with a sour frown.

"She ain't here," came the tart comment.

"Yes, I know," Julie replied with her usual air of optimism.

"Just up and left. Owes me a week's rent, too." The old woman's face twisted in ire.

Julie thought fast. "Yes, she called me last night and asked if we could pay her tab

for her. She's having some problems," Julie said in confidence. "How much did she owe you, Ms...?"

"Fifty, and the name's Mabel Phillips." Her wrinkles rearranged themselves into the semblance of a smile, most likely due to the fact that they were giving her money and not because she had suddenly taken a liking to them.

"Vince, could you give Ms. Phillips her fifty dollars?"

Reluctantly, he slid his wallet out of his back pocket, withdrawing the cash. "You better know what you're doing, Simmons," he leaned over, whispering in Julie's ear. "Besides, you're the one with most of my money now after that little poker game." Julie pushed him away with an elbow.

"Thank you." The woman beamed with joy as her rock-steady hands counted and recounted the bills. "Call me Mabel."

"Mabel, do you think we could have a look around in Cynthia's trailer? She thinks she might have left a couple of things behind."

"Sure, sure." She fished around in the front pocket of her red and blue striped housedress, extracting a key and handing it to Julie. "Go right ahead. Take your time. When you're through, just leave the door unlocked and the key on the counter in there. I'll be busy watching my soaps," she said in a sandpapery whisper, giving a backwards smile.

"Thank you, Mabel." Julie heard Vince exhale a breath of relief as he stood directly beside her.

"No problem." Her eyes narrowed, taking in Vince. "Your man don't talk much, do he?"

"No." Julie took his arm, twining it with her own. "He's the strong, silent type."

Mabel Phillips looked him up and down once more before grinning appreciatively. "He is at that." She gave one of her laughs that quickly turned into a bout of dry, hacking coughs.

*

Vince flushed as he and Julie walked to the other side of the park and to the trailer. Vince thought it looked like a huge foil-wrapped baked potato. "I've never had a woman her age look at me that way before."

"Like how?"

"She was undressing me with those cataract-clouded eyes of hers!"

"Yeah, I noticed that, too." Julie stuck the key in the doorknob and unlocked it. "And you know something?"

"What?"

"So was I." She tossed a grin over her shoulder, opened the door, and walked in.

Vince followed suit, ducking his head so he could fit through the doorway, wondering if he'd ever gain control of his equilibrium again with Julie in his life. The thought of her *in his life* had his stomach dipping, so he concentrated on the task at hand, refusing to ponder the future.

"Well, the place is clean," he commented two minutes later, poking his head into cabinets and peeking in drawers. "Cleaned out, too. Not a clue to be found."

Julie was casing the place too, in her own way, Vince noted. She walked around the cramped quarters with her palms flat, drifting over every single thing in sight.

"I wouldn't say that." She stopped at the area designated as a pint-sized living room with two small sofas sitting across from each other and a removable table as big as a

trashcan lid sitting between them.

"You found something?"

"I see Cynthia sitting here talking to another woman." She paused, her hands over one of the small brown and beige tweed sofa cushions. "It's her sister. Cynthia's asking if she and Tommy can stay with her for awhile."

"Is it because she found out we were on her tail?" Vince opened overhead cupboards, having a look inside. Empty.

"No. She doesn't seem extremely agitated, just ... worried because she's used up all of her money and hasn't found a job. She used a good chunk of her cash for a car. The sister is reluctant. Cynthia made up some lame story about why she had Tommy." Another long pause followed that had Vince antsy.

"And?" He hated waiting around for her to tell him what she was seeing that he couldn't.

Julie eyed him. "Don't get so impatient, big guy. I'm working as fast as I can."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not used to standing on the sidelines watching someone else work." He rocked back and forth on his heels, hands deep in his front pockets. "I like being in the middle of things, being in control and in the leading role. With you, I don't have much of a choice but to sit and wait for you to relay information." He let out a chafing sigh. "But since you seem to be the one with most of the answers, and seeing as how I don't have access to your mind, I wait."

"Are you done complaining?"

"For now."

"Good, now let me get back to work." She closed her eyes again and was silent a moment longer before saying, "Her sister finally gives in and says she can stay for a week or two while she and her husband are out of town on vacation. She kinda knows Cynthia is up to something, but doesn't want to have anything to do with it. She feels obligated to help her out."

"Can you tell where the sister lives?" Finished with his fruitless investigating, Vince now stood in front of Julie in a stooped position since these little sardine cans weren't made for people of his height. Claustrophobia was closing in on him. The sooner they left, the better.

"Hang on." She held up a hand and concentrated. "I can see a house through Cynthia's mind. She's been here before. It's—it's in Hesperia, California."

Vince leaned back against the small, propane stove, relieved that she didn't live in Bum-fuck. "That's just a couple hours from here. You don't have an exact address by any chance?"

Julie shook her head. "I know it's here." She pointed to her temple. "It's just really fuzzy. I'll have a clearer picture of it the closer we get."

"How are you going to pick up on the information when you don't have an item to read?"

"Says who?" She picked the cushion up and tucked it under her arm. "Ready?"

Vince laughed. "Let's go check out of the motel." He had hoped the case would be over by now. He'd hoped for some time alone to think over all that had happened, and could happen, between him and Julie. His sigh was inward and silent. "After that we'll hit the road again. See if we can catch this woman today. She probably arrived just recently. I doubt she'll be leaving her sister's any time soon."

"Do you think we should talk to any of the other residents around here? Maybe they have some information we could use."

"I was just about to do that." He levered himself away from the stove and stood up. "Although I doubt we'll discover anything new or worth hearing."

They didn't. Only two people were willing to talk to them. Another elderly woman who spent ten minutes conveying every grisly detail of her gallbladder operation, but offered no information in regards to Cynthia. The other was a six-year-old boy who had played with Tommy and eaten dinner with him once—macaroni and cheese, hot dogs and cherry Kool-aid—but that was it.

"Let's get going," Vince said as the kid rode away on his bike. "We've just wasted valuable time, and we still have to pack. We should have done it this morning."

"It won't take more than five minutes. Anyway, we were kind of busy this morning." She winked at him. "Remember?"

"How could I forget?" He opened the door and lifted her up and in. He felt his dick spring to life at the memory. "On second thought, I really should forget about it—for now. If not, I'm liable to put the world on hold just to have another taste of you." He buried his face in her lap, making chomping noises.

Julie giggled.

* * * *

After two hours of straight driving and forty more minutes of going down this street and that, Julie finally found the house. She tossed the sofa cushion into the back, no longer needing it. "That's the place!" she whispered as if the people in the house across the street could hear her. "How do you want to handle this?"

They both stared at the new-model home with the painted green rocks in the front that served to look like a grassy lawn. Being a desert community, keeping up even a small patch of grass was costly and time consuming, so some people seemed to have gone the green-rock way, while others sported front yards of white or lava rocks.

The house they studied looked quiet and unoccupied.

"I hate to admit this, but the woman will probably run scared if I show up—if she's even there. Usually, my mouth and my gun always got me what I was after." He slammed his fist against the steering wheel. "Dammit, Julie! I don't want to put you in any danger."

She laid a hand on his forearm. "It shouldn't be dangerous. All we want to do is get close enough to see if she's actually there with Tommy, to make sure it's the right house at all, after that we'll call the authorities." She smiled. "Since I pretty much coerced you into bringing me along, the least I could do is help. What do you have in mind?"

Vince drove to the corner and told Julie his plan. "I thought you could take this clipboard." He reached behind the seat, producing the said item with some official-looking papers attached to it. "Pretend you're in the neighborhood seeking signatures for a petition, for ... I don't know, having a local park built for the kids. It doesn't really matter. All you need is a look at her and, hopefully, the kid. I want you to play it cool, say goodbye, and we'll call in reinforcements. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Don't pull any heroic moves on me, okay?" His tone was serious and warning.

"Don't make a grab for the kid, don't attempt to get inside."

"I won't." Julie felt brave until Vince leaned over and pulled a gun out of the glove

compartment. A shiver passed through her. Not once had the idea crossed her mind that Vince would actually be in need of a loaded weapon. She promised she'd follow his directions to the letter. "I love you, Vince." Her voice came out weak and wobbly.

"Aw, Julie." Cupping the back of her head with one big palm, he brought her forward for a languid kiss. When she looked at him she could see him slip out of the lover role and back into the cool detective guise she knew he was so used to wearing.

"Everything's going to be okay," she whispered softly, more for her own comfort than his. "We've come too far to back out now." She meant the statement in a multitude of ways. Not just in regards to the case, but to her and Vince's relationship as well.

"Yeah, we have." His voice was low and she felt he knew what she was trying to convey.

Five minutes later, Julie walked up to the white and brown stucco home, her heart hammering away at her ribcage like a bionic woodpecker.

Vince had parked his Jeep at the corner and said he'd observe her progress as he assumed the role of a pedestrian ambling down the sidewalk. Heading in her direction, he said he was timing it so that when they passed each other, she would be on the porch, hopefully talking to the woman.

Taking a gulp of hot desert air to thaw her fear-frozen insides, Julie walked up the narrow path leading to an oak door with a stained glass window set in the middle of it. Pasting on a false smile of congeniality, she knocked on the door and waited, feeling as if she'd pass out at any second.

She desperately wanted to look behind her to see if Vince was keeping guard, but knew the action would look suspicious and give her away. She kept her eyes straight ahead, her blood surging at a frightening speed as she noticed blurry movement behind the multicolored window in front of her.

The knob turned, the door opened a few inches, and in the next instant Julie was face-to-face with the woman she had only seen in her mind for the past few days.

"Can I help you?" The woman's voice was cautious, her pale gray eyes darting and suspicious. Her blond hair hung in her face and she wore cutoff jeans and a white t-shirt with a big, pink hibiscus on the front.

"Good afternoon," Julie's said in a friendly tone, wanting to put the woman at ease. "I'm Maggie Barnes, with the local Youth Club. I was wondering if you'd like to sign a petition. We're trying to get a park built for the local children. It's greatly needed, but you know how the city works."

The woman only stared down at her.

Julie gave a nervous laugh. "We have to come up with at least five hundred signatures before they'll even consider it, which leaves me pounding the pavement trying to collect signatures from concerned parents such as you." She hoped she bought it.

She still didn't speak, so Julie plunged ahead. "Do you have any children? If so, I'm sure you realize how important a place for them to play is. Some place nice and grassy, with swings and maybe a slide or two." Julie prayed Cynthia would say something. She was running out of fabricated propaganda and felt herself sweating like crazy.

As if snapped out of a trance, the young woman smiled and opened the door a little more. "Sure, I'd be happy to sign for you." She reached out to take the clipboard from Julie. "As a matter of fact, I do have a child, a son." She smiled proudly.

"That's wonderful. Then I suppose you know how important getting these signatures

is." Julie craned her neck to see if she could get a glimpse of Tommy.

"Boy," she handed the clipboard back to Julie, "you're going to be working for awhile. I'm the first one to sign it."

Before Julie answered, a small boy came up and hugged the woman's leg. Julie's heart stopped for a second. There was no question about the child's identity. This was Tommy Scott.

Cynthia must have become nervous by the way Julie stared at the boy, for she immediately shooed him away, said her goodbye, and was just about to close the door when her eyes landed on something behind Julie.

Julie turned around to see what that something was. It was a someone. Vince and Cynthia had made eye contact. The other woman's eyes were suddenly frantic, traveling from Vince's face to Julie's. Julie knew her own eyes were wide with fear.

What should she do? Turn around and leave and pray that the woman didn't run off with Tommy or hurt him? Barge through the door like Rambo and snatch the boy?

She didn't have to think long. In the next split second Cynthia had the front door open and started dragging Julie inside. Being only five-feet tall and just a little over a hundred pounds, she was no match for the woman who had at least ten inches and forty pounds on her. The gun she now had pointed at her temple didn't help any.

"Come any closer and the bitch is dead."

*

Vince started running across the front yard, intending to come to Julie's aid, but the sight of the small caliber pistol in the woman's hand made him stop in his tracks.

"Damn!" He slashed an angry fist through the air.

"I mean it! You won't take Tommy away from me. Nobody will. He's mine! And don't think I won't kill all three of us just to make that happen."

The door slowly closed, and the last thing Vince saw was Julie's face. Her eyes were big and wide and pleading. It was a sight that ripped his heart out.

Pressing his palm against his forehead, eyes tightly shut, Vince searched inside himself for the indifference he so desperately needed in order to think clearly. Tucking his feelings for Julie and her safety into a box in his brain, he mentally locked it and set the key in a dark corner where he could pick it up later. Julie had told him of this trick and it seemed to work because he felt his detective role slide swiftly into place. He had to get her back safely, Tommy too, but emotions would simply cloud his thinking.

Vince pulled out his Ruger, clutching it between both palms, one finger on the trigger as he slipped to the back of the house to have a peek into one of the windows and get a general layout of the place. It was no use though; every blind was closed and pulled down tight.

Leaning against the side of the house, gun pointing downward, he recited every dirty cuss word he'd ever heard.

What to do now? He could get the cops involved, but what if the broad snapped, killing all three of them as she had threatened? No, he would have to find some way inside without her knowing, wait for an opportunity, and make his move to save Julie and the kid.

As he scouted the outside of the house, looking for some way in, he swore to himself that he would never, ever get involved with a case like this again.

*

Cynthia dragged Julie into a back bedroom, forcing her to take the sheet from the bed and tear it into strips. Julie's stomach churned with every ripping sound. Her hands shook as she tore the fabric, knowing that once the bindings were in place, it would prevent her from any form of escape.

The woman tied Julie to a ladder-back chair, making sure it was impossible for her to move. "Now keep your mouth shut or I'll have to gag you, too," she warned. The crazed look in her eyes made Julie shudder.

She knew she had to remain calm. Vince would come to their aid very soon, she counseled herself.

"Where's Tommy?" Julie asked as calmly as possible.

"Not that it's any of your business, but he's in the other room playing." Cynthia peeked from behind the blinds, apparently watching for any sign of Vince or the police. After a long while she turned from the window and snorted, a caustic smile on her lips. "Looks like lover-boy dumped you, too. Probably took off and never coming back." Her gaze looked far away for a moment.

Julie knew better. Vince was out there, somewhere, waiting for his chance to save them. "Maybe," she said while collecting her thoughts.

Her mind searched for a plan, thinking she could play upon this woman's pain at having been used by Robert Scott. How her baby had been taken away from her by the very same man who claimed to have loved her. Maybe she could get Cynthia to see that she and Tommy were the victims in all of this and that Robert Scott's deeds of betrayal should be exposed.

"Mama Cindy," a small voice called from the other room. "Are you done playing with that lady? I'm hungry."

"Hear that?" The young woman smiled. "He calls me Mama Cindy. In time it will just be Mama." She tore off another long strip and tied it tightly around Julie's mouth, making any sound, except for a muffled anything, virtually impossible. "I told him we were playing cops and robbers so he wouldn't get scared." She let out a giggle. "Kind of what's really happening, huh?" She frowned down at Julie. "I'm leaving this on you for awhile, just till Tommy and I are done with dinner. I'll be back later."

The woman picked up the gun she had put on the nightstand and scratched her head with the barrel against her temple, deep in thought. "I still don't know what I'm going to do with you." With that she turned and left the room.

Julie sat there, trying not to panic as twilight shadows settled over the room with no sign of Vince. She thought about her parents. Would she see them again? She thought about Vince, wondering the same. She thought about her job at the college, about helping out with police cases again. She thought until her brain hurt, all the while trying not to let dread creep up on her, stealing any hope of getting out of this thing alive.

Chapter Twelve

Vince waited until the sun set so that darkness would shroud him. After nightfall his movements wouldn't be seen, especially if lights were turned on in the house. He would have better access in the dark.

It didn't take long, but felt like a hundred years. His entire body ached from remaining in one tense position and he grew more irritated by the minute. If Julie and the kid hadn't been in there he would have knocked down the door and pulled the woman out by her hair. But he had two lives to think about. He couldn't afford to make any wrong moves. So he waited.

Finally he saw the first light click on inside, shining out from behind the blinds and hitting the ground to his left. It was in the living room. His ears picked up the sound of a TV. Good, the psycho broad would be distracted. Now he would make his move.

Slinking around to the side of the house, he saw a window partially open. It looked like a bathroom window. Vince knew he would have one hell of a time squeezing his bulk through the puny opening. He would fit though. He had to.

Double-checking that his piece was still safe and snug in the waistband of his jeans, he pulled his pocket knife out and sliced open the screen. Sliding the small window fully open, he heaved all of his two-hundred-thirty pounds off the ground and through the opening. It was no small feat, and he was sure to keep all expletives to himself as all four sides of the metal frame gouged into his chest, back, and abdomen.

Finally he was inside, crouched on hands and knees in the darkened room that smelled of bar soap and toilet bowl cleaner. He stayed still for several minutes, wondering if his not-too-graceful entrance had been heard. No sound of footsteps approached, so he figured he had made a safe entry.

Stealing over to the closed door, he turned the knob quietly, listening for any noise that may indicate he'd been found out. The TV was down low, though he could make out the unmistakable sounds of an old Happy Days rerun.

Peeking out through the tiniest of cracks, he searched the hallway. Empty.

Slipping out, trying to remain as flat against the wall as the paint itself, he looked to the left and right. There was a room at each end. Ahead and a little to the right was the living room. He heard the kid laugh as Fonzie banged a jukebox and it started playing then uttered his trademark, "Aaaayyyy." Absently, Vince imagined him in the thumbs-up stance.

Taking a guess that Julie was being held in one of the bedrooms, he chose to go right, figuring he could grab a quick look at the front room while on his way. As he sneaked past, he caught a glimpse of Tommy curled up in front of the illuminated screen with several teddy bears at his side. There was no sign of the woman; which meant she was either in the kitchen or in one of the bedrooms.

With footsteps stealthy as a cat burglar's, he came to the room at the end of the hall. The door was open. The room was pitch-black. He listened, standing just out of sight. He heard plates and silverware being put away. She was in the kitchen, which meant Julie could be alone.

"Julie," he whispered into the darkness. No answer. Crouching down, he entered the

murky room, calling her name again. Still no answer. He heard a woman talking at the opposite end of the hall. A light went on. Damn! He had gone the wrong way! Now the psycho was with Julie.

*

"Thought you might be hungry." It was a flat statement bearing no hint of friendliness. Cynthia walked over to Julie with a plate of food in one hand and the gun in the other. Laying them both down on the nightstand, she took off the strip of rose-patterned cloth from around Julie's mouth. She stared down at her with a frown between her brows, looking puzzled. "I don't know how you're going to eat being tied up like that." She pursed her lips, deep in thought.

Now Julie figured she could make her move and play upon this woman's emotional misery over what had happened to her after giving in to Robert Scott's empty words of love.

"Cynthia, I'm not here to hurt you," Julie said in a soft voice meant to calm her young, edgy captor.

"Of course you're not. I've got the gun." She flashed Julie a look of superiority.

"Well, that's true, but I never intended to cause you any harm in the first place. I was only checking to see if Tommy was with you and if he was all right. His parents are worried sick. Besides, do I look like a police officer? Or someone who would cause you any damage?"

"No, but your boyfriend sure did."

"He's not my boyfriend, he's—" Julie started to speak, but the woman stopped her.

"Look, Maggie, or whatever your name is, I saw the way you two looked at each other. It was the same way I used to look at..." she didn't finish her sentence, casting her pained gaze to the earth-toned carpeting. Sitting on the bed, she swiped the back of her hand over her eyes.

"Cynthia, can I be honest with you?"

She slowly lifted her head. "About what?" She sniffed a tear back.

"I know what Robert Scott said to you. He hurt you badly."

The other woman sat up very stiff and straight. Her eyes grew wide. "How do you know about us? Did he tell you?"

"No, I'm the only one who knows. June Scott hired me to help find her son. The police gave up weeks ago. I'm a psychic."

The woman let out a breath of disbelief. "Oh, sure."

"How else would I know about your affair with Robert? My partner and I have already been to the trailer park you were living in until this morning. I also know about all of the promises he made to you. That he would divorce his wife so he could marry you. He told you he loved you. I also know about the baby, Cynthia." Julie's voice was soft. "And the abortion."

The woman's mouth formed a silent no! "How could you know?" Gun in hand, she was at Julie's side immediately.

"I know a lot of things about people I've never met. I understand, Cynthia. I want to help you. Don't ruin the rest of your life by running from the law." Julie inhaled a fortifying breath. "Tommy isn't yours."

"Shut up!" The woman stood, lifted her right arm, and the butt of the gun came down hard on Julie's cheekbone. "He's mine now! My baby was taken from me. Tommy

belongs to me and nobody else. Nobody is going to take him away from me, not the cops and certainly not you! Do you hear me?"

Julie's left cheek burned like the devil and tears blurred her vision. She squinted, blinking away the moisture in her eyes and saw Vince's massive form sneaking up behind the wrathful woman. He held a finger up to his lips, mutely telling her to stay quiet.

"Mama Cindy!" Tommy galloped into the room, stopping short as he took in the giant standing in the room with a gun pointed directly at Cynthia. Vince made a grab for him as he screamed and ran by, but he was instantly glued to the woman's leg.

Julie inhaled a sharp breath as Cynthia held the gun against her head once more. The metal was cold and the pressure she used confirmed she was all nerves. Julie closed her eyes, expecting the worst.

"You come any closer and I'll blow her fucking brains out!" She reached down behind Julie with her free hand to untie her from the chair, never taking her eyes off Vince who stood less than six feet away. "Throw the gun on the bed," she commanded Vince.

He refused. "Let her go," it was a low growl.

"Not a chance, big guy. I'm taking the lady for a ride. If you know what's good for you, and her, you won't follow us. Maybe I'll drop her off somewhere when I'm sure Tommy and I are safe and weren't followed." She shrugged. "Then again, maybe I won't."

She jerked Julie up from the chair. Her legs felt unsteady as the circulation started to flow once more. Her hands were still tied behind her back and the gun still nestled against the side of her skull as they sidled past Vince, all three of them.

Julie thoroughly believed this would be the last time she ever saw Vince. *I love you*, she mouthed the words, knowing they may never pass her lips again.

Vince gave a slight nod of his head in acknowledgement, the look on his face telling her he would not give up the fight.

Cynthia pulled her out of the room, never taking her eyes off the towering figure at the center of it. "Tommy, go get in the car!" she yelled to the wide-eyed child in the hall. "Go!" He took off running in the said direction.

"And just to make sure you won't be coming after us, mister, I'll have to stop any chances of your good intentions at being a hero." She lowered the barrel of the gun, pointing it directly at Vince.

He took one look at the gun and threw himself to the side as it went off. The first two bullets missed him, one going through the mattress and another plowing into the closet door. The third sliced through his right thigh.

Julie let out a cry of horror. Vince fell back on the bed cussing his heart out. Cynthia snickered, pulling Julie's resisting body out the side door that led directly to the garage.

A door off the kitchen led the way to the murky garage. When they entered, Julie could make out a waiting car and Tommy scrambling into the back seat.

As they approached the white Ford hatchback, Julie felt her feet turn to cement and her stomach roll. Once she entered the vehicle, she knew she would probably never lay her eyes on Vince again.

Julie pressed herself against the woman in back of her, refusing to take another step forward as an animal-like will to survive rose in her. She had to fight back. She had to scream, to yell until somebody heard her and came to their rescue. When she opened her mouth though, Cynthia leaned in close. "Make one sound and you're dead."

Julie tried getting a glimpse behind them to see if Vince was near, but the light coming from the kitchen only revealed an empty room. She closed her eyes, feeling her heart take a nosedive.

"Get in!" Cynthia ordered, opening the door of the Fiesta. Julie didn't move fast enough, so the irate woman gave her a hard shove with her knee, causing Julie to fall across the front seat, face down. When Julie's mouth hit the seat, she bit her lip. The metallic taste of blood covered her tongue.

She turned her head to look in the backseat. Tommy was there; huddled in the corner, knees drawn up to his chest, thumb in his mouth. Again, the insanity of it all hit her. What was Cynthia's plan now that she and Vince were in the picture? Julie had never been anyone's hostage. She had always witnessed crimes in her mind's eye, not in reality.

She forced a smile at the child behind her. "It's going to be alright, Tommy," she whispered. "You're going to see your mom and dad soon." The boy gave a solemn nod of his head, the light inside the car reflecting off the tears forming in his gray eyes.

Julie took in the multitude of supplies still stashed in the back of the car. There were boxes of canned goods, blankets, and she saw more items in the very back. Everything that had been in the trailer out in Nevada, she assumed.

Her spirits plummeted. There was enough food and provisions to last a week or more on the run. She breathed a sigh of defeat. They could be gone for quite awhile. Would Vince find them? Would he be all right? The bullet wound to his leg had to be pretty bad. And she prayed this woman wouldn't empty any more bullets out of that gun.

Chapter Thirteen

"Damn! Damn! Damn!" Vince yelled in pain and frustration as he heard a car start up and go tearing down the street, hell-bent on a death wish.

Grabbing a couple strips of the torn sheet, he tied them over the wound tightly, hoping it would cut off some of the blood flow. Right now he couldn't spare the luxury of an emergency room. The only thing occupying his mind was finding Julie and Tommy. When he did, he felt like tearing the psycho bitch's heart out with his bare hands and serving it to the cops on a stake. Vince balked at his sadistic line of thinking, but still found morbid comfort in it.

He stood up, putting pressure on his right leg. It hurt like a son-of-a-bitch. Pulling his cell from its home in his pocket, he made a quick phone call to the local sheriff's department. It was time to call in reinforcements. Much as he hated to admit it, he needed all the help he could get right now.

When the line connected, Vince gave them the details, omitting any information that might land his ass in jail. Not knowing which direction the woman went in, he limped outside, swearing all the way under his breath. The way she'd peeled rubber down the street, he was certain there had to be some indication as to which way they went.

Making his way off the curb and onto the street, he snorted with satisfaction. There on the cracked and graying asphalt, illuminated by the street light overhead, were rows of black lines made from tires, pointing the way like arrows.

They were headed back toward Nevada.

Vince relayed the bit of information, clicked off the phone, and started down to the corner where his Jeep was parked. He was glad nobody was outside watching him. That's all he'd need right now, a couple of good Samaritans to slow him down.

He smelled a barbecue somewhere and imagined a family gathered around a table laughing, talking, and eating some burgers, maybe a mutt sitting nearby waiting for one of the kids to throw him a treat. Was such a familial scene written in his future? Or had it been deleted forever? For some odd reason he couldn't imagine being alone anymore. Where before he had craved his solitude and caseload after caseload, now he craved a little squirt with coffee eyes and a wicked laugh that made his balls bust.

As thoughts drifted in and out of his head, sweat dripped down the back of his neck and gathered under his arms. His leg was just about numb. All except the area where the bullet was lodged, that burned like hell. Pain and desperation had his stomach churning like a junkie going through withdrawal.

When a light breeze hit him, he breathed deep and grabbed on to the welcome coolness.

Just a few more yards and he would be at the Cherokee. It felt like crossing a hundred football fields.

When he had at long last made it to his Jeep, Vince opened the door, hauled himself in and rested his head against the leather covered steering wheel for a couple of seconds. Pressing his eyes shut, he tried to calm his racing pulse and heaving lungs.

Shaking his head free of the mind-fogging pain, he slipped the key into the ignition, started the motor, put it in gear, turned, and headed toward Nevada. And all the while one

thought rattled around in his mind. He had to find Julie and Tommy before that woman decided to empty the pistol into any more innocent people.

*

"How could you just shoot him like that?" Julie asked in shock as they sped down the long highway. She leaned heavily on the door, her head pressed against the cool glass. Every time they hit a rock or groove in the road her head would jerk and bang against the window.

"How touching," Cynthia drawled, shooting Julie with a mock look of concern. "You're better off without him. He'll only break your heart. They all do. If I had my way, I'd kill every last one of the bastards."

Julie's brows bent in sadness for this woman. "Don't say that."

"Why not?" When she turned to look at her, Julie cringed at the malevolent look on Cynthia's face. "That includes your boyfriend back there." She shrugged and focused straight ahead again. "You know ... a person can only lose so much blood..." She let her unspoken words hang in the darkness around them, sending gruesome images through Julie's mind of Vince lying dead in a pool of crimson.

She forced away each and every horrid mental picture. He would be okay. She had to keep believing that.

At ten p.m. they crossed the Nevada border. Julie started feeling more tense. Where was Vince? Unconscious? Dead?

"Cynthia, think about what you're doing," Julie began in a desperate tone. "Do you honestly think you won't be caught? That you can just steal somebody's child and get away with it?"

Cynthia cast an incredulous glance in Julie's direction. "Are you talking again? Do you ever shut up? I swear I should have left the gag on you!"

"Forget about Robert Scott. You can find someone else. Someone who will truly love you. And you can have children of your own."

"Oh, I fully intend on forgetting about Robert. I *will* have a new life, and that life will include Tommy."

"What do you plan to do? Run forever? You will be caught. Surely you must realize that." Julie scanned Cynthia's profile. Her heart felt full when she thought about how young this girl was, yet she was throwing the rest of her life away with this venomous stunt of hers.

"Maybe." She gave a dismissive lift of her shoulders. "But I'm going to do all I can to make that impossible. I'll head to Canada or Mexico. Change our names. I have other plans, too. I've been thinking about this for a long time." She laughed. "I suppose I shouldn't be saying these things. You might tell. That wouldn't be nice, would it?" Her hand wandered to the gun sitting in her lap, running her fingers over it like a cherished pet.

Julie decided to keep her mouth shut and just look for any opportunity to escape. With her hands and feet tied it would be difficult, though. And there was Tommy to consider. She glanced back at the child who was now asleep, his head resting against one of the cardboard boxes beside him.

Turning her somber gaze on the black road ahead, headlights shining into nothingness, she wished it was all just a bad dream. The woman beside her gave a low chuckle, reminding her that this was reality. And reality was she may not live to see

tomorrow.

They drove for what seemed like eons. A sign they passed over an hour ago indicated they were now on the outskirts of Las Vegas.

Stealing a glance at her abductor, Julie couldn't miss the wildness in her eyes, the harsh twist of her mouth, the tension holding her body in an unnaturally stiff position. Her hair now back in a ponytail, it made her appear far younger than her nineteen years. Julie knew this woman's future was either going to be a prison cell, a padded room, or death if she should take her own life. In a way she felt sorry for the life Cynthia was creating for herself.

Julie remembered something Vince had said during their first meeting. There was no information on this woman. Everything had been faked. So who was she? And why had she chosen to make up so many lies? Julie decided if she was to die, she wanted to know everything she could about her potential murderess.

"Why did you fake all of your information with the Scotts?"

The other woman jumped. The gun fell to the floor. "Shit!" She reached her arm down, searching for the weapon. Distracted, she swerved to the other side of the road then straightened the wheel again, retrieving the pistol. It rested on her lap again. "Whisper next time, will you? You scared the hell out of me, and I don't want you waking up Tommy."

"Who are you really?" she asked more quietly this time. "Why did you lie to the Scotts about your identity?" Julie laughed at her own nerve. At any moment she could be shot, probably would be, yet she refused to cower under this woman's domination. Curiosity outweighed her fear.

"Who am I?" Cynthia repeated, deep in thought. "Joan of Arc. Queen Elizabeth. Cleopatra." She laughed, apparently amused. "It doesn't really matter, does it?"

She went serious again. "As for why I lied to the Scotts, that's a long story, and not very pretty, I'm afraid." She flashed a grin at Julie. "And just think, the story's not even over yet." She gave giggled. "I just can't wait to see how it ends."

Julie wished for a happy ending, but things were looking more and more dismal.

Cynthia reached forward to turn off the air conditioner. "I'm hot as hell, but I don't want Tommy catching a chill. I don't need him getting sick." She sounded like any normal mother concerned with the wellbeing of her child, but when she spoke again, the unstable vibration was back in her voice. "So, you want to hear the long, sad story, huh?"

"I'm not going anywhere." Julie's hands felt numb and she shifted around a little, trying to find a more comfortable position.

"No, I suppose you're not." She let out an amused snort, but her next words were dark. "I seriously doubt they would have hired a nanny for their precious son if they found out she had killed her own child."

Julie sucked in a sharp breath and recoiled. "You ... killed your own child?"

Cynthia gave a languorous shrug. "Not intentionally. I was fifteen when I had Alex." She went on to explain, "My boyfriend left me when Alex was two. One night a friend invited me to a party, and I figured what the hell. I needed to get my mind off my life as a single mother working at a burger joint, so I went to the party and took him with me."

She shifted in her seat, clearly uncomfortable with her memories. "I got home about four in the morning and passed out on the couch, when I woke up I couldn't find my son." Her formal mask of indifference slipped, exposing the wounded soul beneath. "There was

a big commotion going on outside of the apartments where I lived. Everybody was crowded around the pool. I rushed down, my head pounding from the hangover." Her shoulders fell and when she looked at Julie, for a second, her eyes were lifeless. "I knew what I'd find. Somehow you just know. I saw Alex on the cement. Someone had pulled him from the pool. He was dead."

Julie was shocked, but remained quiet as she examined the young girl's silhouette in the darkness. She couldn't even begin to fathom such pain.

"I started screaming. When the paramedics came they had to tranquilize me. I was charged with neglect and put on probation due to my age, but each day of living without Alex became harder and harder until I gave up trying." She sighed heavily, swiping at a tear. "I tried to OD, but a neighbor found me. I was committed to a mental hospital and stayed there for over a year."

She sniffed and tried to sound aloof. "When I got out, I was determined to start a new life. I changed my name, appearance, all of my personal information." She shot Julie a glance of knowing. "It's easy when you have the right connections."

"And you met June Scott?" Julie prodded.

"Her son looks just like my Alex would with those gray eyes and curly blonde hair. I told her I was looking for work; she liked me and needed a nanny." Her statement was sparse, yet Julie could very well fill in the holes.

"Robert and I became intimate right away. I really thought he loved me. When I told him I was going to have his baby and he could finally get the divorce..." Her knuckles were white on the steering wheel, her foot heavy on the gas pedal as if trying to escape the memory.

"He made sure I didn't carry the baby past my third month. After that I heard him telling his wife I couldn't be trusted, that he noticed some things missing, that I should be fired. And I was."

She drove faster and faster. "I never thought I'd be caught. You're good. But with you gone, there won't be any third-eye that can locate me. You know, I really don't want to kill you."

Julie didn't believe it.

"Though I figure, if I've killed once..."

Julie's heart tried clawing its way out of her chest. She checked the side mirror and saw no sign of headlights in the distance, only blackness. Mentally she sent a prayer for Vince's health and safety, and for a miracle to happen.

As if in answer, the car slowed, sputtering and coughing. Cynthia pulled over to the side of the road as the car came to a jerky halt and the engine died.

"Damn!" Cynthia banged on the dashboard in frustration, looking at the gauges. "Empty!"

Tommy started at the loud noise, huddled closer against the door of the car and started crying.

Julie offered soothing words to him, wondering if this turn of events was good or bad. They were miles from any sort of civilization, even farther from a gas station.

The other woman sat there silent, looking deep in thought. After what seemed like an hour she said in a strangely calm voice, "Guess we'll be walking."

"You're crazy!" Julie sucked in a sharp breath at her own accusation.

The woman sighed deeply, bent her head down and looked at her with raised eyes.

Right away Julie thought of Jack Nicholson's character in *The Shining*. "I should kill you now just so I won't have to listen to you anymore."

Julie tensed as Cynthia sat there staring at her.

An approaching vehicle broke the silence around them. Headlights pierced the darkness. Julie's soul jumped in anticipation and fear. New blood coursed into her limp hands.

She heard tires grinding over dirt and small rocks. Cynthia was out of the car in a flash, screaming at the approaching vehicle. "Stay back! I have a gun!" She held the pistol in front of her. "I'll kill them! I'll kill you too!"

A driver exited; a huge shadow against the light.

Checking the side mirror again, Julie saw Vince's Cherokee. It was a sight she had given up on witnessing. She closed her eyes, grateful. He was alive.

"Listen to me, Tommy," she said calmly, twisting her head back to look at the frightened boy. "I want you to open the door and get out. Then I want you to run over to that black truck over there. But don't go to Cynthia, okay?"

"But Cynthia loves me." He looked scared, confused, and Julie worried he would choose Cynthia over safety.

"I know she loves you, but she's sick. She needs help and you can't go with her right now." Julie kept her voice soft.

"She—she's sick?" The innocence in his eyes brought a silent tear to Julie's throat. "Is that why she's yelling and stuff?"

"Yes, so I need you to get out and run over there to the other car, okay? If you can't get inside, just wait by the door of the other car. We're going to make sure you get back to your mom and dad."

At her last words Tommy smiled, nodded, got out of the car and ran.

Julie's gaze raced to Vince who limped toward Cynthia. Words came from his lips, but the frantic beating of her heart made it impossible to hear. His complexion looked pale, his eyes hollow.

"No, Tommy!" Cynthia cried. "Don't go with them!"

"Don't listen to her, Tommy." Vince's deep voice sounded strained. "Just stay where you are, son. Put the gun down, lady. I won't hurt you. All I want is Julie."

As if she had forgotten about and suddenly remembered her bound captive, she peered inside the vehicle. "Oh, Julie..." she said with a teasing lilt to her voice. "Get out of the car and get over here! Throw your gun down." Her second request was directed at Vince who had stopped moving when Julie's name was mentioned. "I know you have a gun, now throw it."

"Don't listen to her, Julie," Vince called out as he reached into the waistband of his jeans and tossed the gun somewhere out into the inky night. "Try to make it to the Jeep."

"You do as I say or your boyfriend is buzzard bait." Her malicious tone gave Julie no other choice but to obey.

"I'm coming." Julie slid over to the driver's side of the car and out the open door. An arm went around her neck and she was pulled tightly against Cynthia's quaking body. The woman's breathing was erratic and her entire body was damp with sweat from the height of her emotions.

*

"Dammit, woman! Don't you ever listen?" Vince cursed as Julie came into view in

the bright spotlight. She looked tired, scared, and there was an ugly bruise on her left cheek. Other than that she looked okay.

"I don't want you hurt any more than you already are, Vince."

Cynthia grabbed a handful of Julie's hair, yanking her to her side. Vince's eyes met Julie's for a second before he pinned Cynthia with a fierce look again.

"I'll make a deal with you, mister. You give me Tommy and you can have your lady back."

"No deal. I want them both." Vince took a few steps forward and the psycho fired two shots in the air. Julie jumped. Tommy screamed and started crying.

"Stay back! You don't listen too good, do you? Do you want me to put another bullet in you? Or how about your woman?" Another shot went off, this time in the ground directly in front of Vince. The smell of gunpowder hung in the air.

Vince kept track of the bullets. That and gut instinct told him the Beretta was empty. It's all he had to go by. It was enough.

He took two tentative steps forward. The woman was sweating like a race horse; her eyes huge and darting. He took another step and they were less than ten-feet apart.

"Stay back!" she shrieked as Vince took long, even strides toward her. "I'll kill her! Don't make me do it! Not again! Not again!"

Vince was nearly on her now.

"That's it, mister." Her mien switched in that instant. Cold. Uncaring. Her voice low. "She's dead." Her finger squeezed the trigger, an empty click echoing into the night. She tried again. *Click. Click. Click.*

Cynthia howled like a wounded animal, dropped the gun and fell to her knees sobbing. Julie started laughing and weeping at the same time. The distant sound of sirens approached.

After making sure Julie was okay and keeping an eye on Cynthia, Vince rushed over to check on the boy. He was pressed flat against the side of the Jeep with his hands covering his face. "It's okay, Tommy. You're going back with your parents now." He scooped the little guy up, putting him in the backseat of the vehicle until the cops arrived. Tommy sniffed, giving him a watery smile.

He went back and cuffed Cynthia who lay curled up on the ground in defeat, then was at Julie's side. His instincts hadn't failed him. He untied the binding from around her feet and wrists, massaging the tender skin. The pain in his leg was forgotten as relief filled him.

Six patrols roared to a stop, throwing up dust clouds, diffusing the flashing lights radiating from the vehicles and went swirling off into the night.

"It's okay, babe. It's over. You did good." He petted her hair, whispering more words of love and nonsense while Julie mumbled frantic, grateful utterances against his chest.

Vince looked on as they led Cynthia to one patrol car and Tommy to another. It was finally over.

Chapter Fourteen

Vince and Julie arrived at the police department early the following morning. Tommy was about to be reunited with his parents and Cynthia was in custody. Julie and Vince had their injuries tended to at a local hospital in Vegas. Hers were a severe contusion but no broken bones.

The bullet that penetrated Vince had missed a main artery by less than an inch. The piece of lead was removed and they had wanted to keep him overnight for observation, but he refused. He wouldn't even take the pain medication the doctor had prescribed, preferring to gripe and grumble and cuss his way to Los Angeles. At about four in the morning, Julie persuaded him to take a pill. She needed it.

When they first arrived at the station, they'd been questioned separately for over an hour. Afterward, Julie called her parents, leaving out most of the details until she could talk to them in person. Now they waited on a blue padded bench, tired and hungry, but wanting to witness the reunion of Tommy and his parents—the final scene in their adventure.

A little after eight, June Scott—with her husband trailing behind—walked into the station. A female officer brought Tommy out. Trails of dried tears ran down his cheeks. He looked uncertain until he spotted his parents.

June Scott's eyes grew wide with joy. They were finally seeing their son for the first time in over thirty days. "Tommy?" The one word caught on a sob, his name spoken in question as if she couldn't believe he was safe and finally here.

"Mommy!" Tommy raced to his mother who lifted him up and held him tight.

The look on their faces brought a tear to Julie's eye. Vince pulled her close, nuzzling her hair, as they looked on from the sidelines.

Robert Scott walked over to Vince and Julie, his steps hesitant, yet purposeful. "Thank you, Detective." He reached out and shook Vince's hand as he and Julie stood. "You, too, Miss Simmons." He presented her with a warm, if not guilt-ridden smile.

"No problem, Scott." Vince said gruffly as he took his hand back. "This whole thing could have ended up much worse."

"I know." Robert's eyes held a remorse that comforted Julie somewhat.

Robert looked back at his wife and child. Turning to face Vince and Julie once more, he gave a small smile. "I've got a lot of repairing to do. We start family and marriage counseling next week." He looked grim yet hopeful. "June knows about everything. Well, I'd better get going." He turned and joined his wife and son as they headed out the door. Robert ruffled his son's hair, giving Vince and Julie a quick glance before exiting through the doors.

"You're a sucker for a happy ending, aren't you?" Julie looked up at Vince who had a crooked smile on his lips, twining her arm in his.

"Hey, isn't everybody?" He bent his head closer to her.

"Yeah." Her voice was a soft invitation as his mouth hovered so near hers, warm and inviting.

A slap on Vince's back made him realize they were still standing at the station and had at least a dozen pairs of eyes on them. He stiffened, straightening to his full height.

"Marcelli." Sergeant Anderson nodded, a gruff tone in his voice that was purely teasing. "I never liked your rebellious style while you were here, but when you create endings like this one, I'm sure as hell sorry I lost you. Congratulations, both of you, for solving this case." He reached out a hand to take Julie's in an affectionate grip, a wide smile on his round face.

Anderson laughed then grew serious. "Julie, if you ever feel up to it, we'd love to have you help us out."

Vince put a protective arm around Julie's shoulder. "I don't know, Bill, she gets pretty wiped out."

"I'd be happy to," Julie offered. "I'll be fine," she said to Vince who looked down at her with a frown.

Vince shrugged. "You're the boss."

Julie laughed and said, "I'll be in touch. We need to get going now." She needed sleep, and she needed Vince, the sooner the better.

"See you later, Anderson." Hand in hand they turned and walked toward the doors.

"Hey! You know what the penalty is for threatening an officer of the law?" he called after them.

"Eat my shorts!" Vince tossed over his shoulder.

The cool morning was quickly being absorbed by the approaching heat of the day. The air was still and cars were already thick on the street as they walked to the parking lot. When they got to his Jeep, Vince lifted Julie into her seat and kissed her until she was breathless.

His gaze traveled all over her face. "You know, we're good together, Simmons, in many ways."

"You're right, Marcelli, we are good together."

"I know I've been pretty solitary these past years, but I've been thinking about looking for a partner. Maybe you'd like the position?"

Her soul went flat and she was silent for a moment before saying, "Crime fighting partner?"

"Yep!" He planted a kiss on the tip of her nose, closed her door, and came around to the other side, sliding into his seat.

"Umm ... sure. I'd be happy to help out on some cases." She looked at her folded hands in her lap, trying hard to swallow the lump of disappointment in her throat.

Vince lifted her chin. "I think I'll keep you." He winked. "Now why don't we go back to your place and roll around in that fairytale bed of yours?"

Julie laughed and strapped herself in. "Let's!"

The End

About the Author:

Kelly Wallace is a typical workaholic—and loves every busy minute of it. Not only is she a single mother and best-selling romance author, but she's also a well-respected psychic counselor through her own website The Psychic Soul, international radio show host of The Psychic View, and resident psychic writer for WPRT Paranormal Radio

A lover of romance and strong characterization, Kelly believes that any story worth reading should have a hero/heroine that readers can fall in love with. She is currently living her dream, writing sizzling tales of suspense with paranormal elements, as well as contemporary and humorous romance. All of her books contain highly sensual love scenes and sexual tension that will make your heart race!

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